POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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Theory and Methods in Political Science

Second Edition

Edited by

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and

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Preface to the Second Edition

When we planned the first edition of this book a decade or so ago it was with a clear purpose. In our view, too many politics degrees, particularly in UK universities, failed to give students a thorough grounding on the various approaches to the study of politics or political science. After completing a politics degree students had little idea of the scope of the subject or the ways in which it could be studied – rather they had considerable knowledge about different, often discrete, aspects of politics. We set out to commission articles that covered various approaches to the discipline. At the same time, we also felt that, while many US degrees in politics did provide modules in research methods, most UK degrees in politics did not. As such, we aimed to provide an informed introduction to some of the methods used and methodological issues raised in the discipline. *Theory and Methods in Political Science* clearly met a need felt by lecturers and students, as the first edition sold well. This edition aims to build on that relative success, but there have been some changes that, in large part, reflect comments on the first edition.

The most important new addition is a separate chapter on issues of ontology and epistemology that allows us to discuss the fundamental questions of what there is to know about the political world and how knowledge of it can be constructed. We have also added a chapter on Marxism, which although perhaps out of fashion at the beginning of the twenty-first century nevertheless constitutes an important approach to political studies, a chapter on how to combine qualitative and quantitative methods and a chapter on the role of ideas in explaining political phenomena. All of the other chapters have either been completely revised by the authors from the first edition or taken forward in new directions by different authors. As a result of these changes there have been some casualities. The main section to go has been the discussion of theories of the state. These chapters were a valuable part of the first edition and we hope that the issue of state theory can form the heart of a new book in Palgrave's Political Analysis series. For the second edition we have given priority to chapters that more directly address the issues of how political science is done.

In putting together the second edition we would like to thank our authors for their forbearance in responding to the editors' requests. We owe a considerable debt to Clare Bambra who helped sort out the book in its final stages. Her efficiency and insightful interventions in the editing of

the final text testify to her abilities. She was perhaps also helped by her experience of being taught by David Marsh with the first edition of the book. Clare was a PhD candidate at Manchester University and is now a Research Assistant at the Department of Public Health Studies, University of Liverpool, UK. We would also like to thank the three anonymous referees for their comments, which helped us improve the second edition in the late stages of its production. Steven Kennedy, our publisher, has also provided much valuable help. Chapters 1, 7 and 11 were written and much of the editing undertaken while David Marsh was a Visiting Fellow in the Political Science Programme of the Research School in Social Sciences at the Australian National University during 2000–1. He would like to acknowledge the institutional and personal support he received during that year.

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Introduction

GERRY STOKER AND DAVID MARSH

This book aims to provide an introduction to the way that political scientists carry out their studies. The book looks at the general ways of thinking or theorising offered by political scientists and the methods they use to discover more about the subject. It is inevitable that the book will neither be fully comprehensive in its coverage of political science nor provide sufficient depth in approaching all of the issues that are considered. Our claim is rather that we can provide an introduction to the main approaches to political science and a balanced assessment of some of the debates and disagreements that are an appropriate feature of a discipline that has several thousand years of history behind it and many thousands of practitioners in the modern world.

The book is divided into three broad parts. The first eight chapters aim to map the broad ways of approaching political science that have had and will, we think, continue to have a major effect on the development of political science. We begin with a chapter that encourages students of political science to be more self-conscious about what it is they think they can find out and how they think they can find out about it. These issues of ontology and epistemology – to use the technical terms – should be a central element in the debate between different approaches to political science. Thereafter six different approaches to political science are outlined in the chapters that follow. Specifically we deal with behavioural, rational choice, institutional, feminist, interpretive and Marxist approaches. Each of the approaches combines a set of attitudes, understandings and practices that define a certain way of doing political science. We have asked each of our authors to not simply advocate their approach but also take on board a range of critical comments and concerns about that approach. In this respect we hope that each author offers a robust but self-aware and critical understanding of his or her way of doing political science. The final chapter in this first part of the book deals with the issue of normative theory – a focus that takes us back to one of the most traditional of approaches to political science but one which, we would argue, still has considerable relevance. Political science should be interested not only in understanding 'what is'; it should also be concerned with the normative issues of 'what should be'.

The second part of the book moves on from our discussion of broad approaches to consider in detail some of the methods and methodological challenges. We examine the range of both qualitative and quantitative techniques that are available and how these techniques can be combined. We move on to consider the potential and limitations of the comparative method in understanding political phenomena. There is a particular set of issues thrown up by the attempt to understand politics on a cross-national basis.

The third part of the book deals with what can be described as two of the key meta-theoretical challenges faced by political science and social science in general. The first examines how best to combine a sense of action and choice with a sense of constraints and opportunities in the study of politics. 'People make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing' may be a truism but it is one that political scientists need to take account of in their explanations. There is also a broad concern shared by many when they undertake political science with how to allow both sufficient space to the role of ideas in explaining political phenomena and scope for the role of institutions. This is the concern of the final chapter in the main body of the book. Some general and brief conclusions about the study of political science are presented at the end of the book.

Here, by way of introduction to the book, the aim is to present an overview of the answers to various important questions about the nature of political science. The study of politics can trace its origins at least as far back as Plato (Almond, 1996), but our concern is with its contemporary expression. The American Political Science Association was formed in 1903. Other national associations for the profession of political science followed, such as the Political Studies Association of the UK in 1950. The American association had at the beginning of the twenty-first century over 13,500 members from over seventy different countries. It is still true to say that the Americans are the most powerful force in political science but we agree with the assessment of Goodin and Klingemann (1996) that in the last few decades the discipline has become a genuine international enterprise. Excellent and challenging political science is produced in many countries and this book seeks to reflect an appreciation of the internationalisation of political science. All of our authors have British connections but it is to be hoped that their writings deal with issues of concern to the political science community across the world.

This introduction addresses itself initially to five questions. We aim to focus discussion on this central set of questions that anyone approaching a discipline such as political science would want to ask.

- Is there one best approach to the study of politics?
- What is covered by the umbrella of the subject matter of politics?
- What is meant by a scientific approach to the study of politics?
- What is the connection between the study of politics and the actual practice of politics?
- Is there a standard method to use when undertaking political science research?

Answering these questions will provide a suitable backcloth to the more detailed study of theories and methods offered in the core of the book. Each of the questions is addressed in a section of the introduction presented below.

The discipline of political science: a celebration of diversity

Read many of the recent reviews of political science and they agree that political science has become more diverse and more cosmopolitan in character (see, for example, Almond 1990 and Goodin and Klingemann 1996). Some of those who pioneered what they called the scientific treatment of the subject (see the further discussion below) had expected that the scientific revolution would lead to a unity in the understanding of political science (Weisberg 1986: 4). There can be little doubt that those ambitions have not been realised. There is a basis for some common agreement about what constitutes 'minimal professional competence' but, as Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 6) note, when it comes to judging the value of work beyond some agreed baseline of coherence and craftsmanship, 'the higher aspirations are many and varied'. There is a *de facto* pluralist view of the nature of political science endeavour.

We would emphasise only two points beyond supporting the pluralism that is now widely acknowledged. First, there is a need to recognise just how considerable is the variety of political science at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There are many distinct approaches and ways of undertaking political science. Our book presents a particular focus on six options in terms of approaches that seek to explain the way that politics works in our world. The spread of our coverage is greater than that offered in recent reviews of political science in Britain (wider, for example, than that offered in Hayward 1999; see on this point also Bevir 2000) and the international review offered by Goodin and Klingemann (1996). We believe that at this stage in its development it is important for political science not to depict itself as a small club of like-minded people. The better

image is of a broad church with different starting points and concerns but a shared commitment to developing a better understanding of politics.

This observation leads on naturally to our second point, namely that the key challenge is not to launch a campaign for unity but to argue for diversity to be combined with dialogue. Almond (1990, 1996) warns that the discipline should avoid constructing itself into an uneasy collection of separate sects. There is a pluralism of method and approach out there that should not be denied but it should not be 'isolative' but rather interactive. It should be eclectic and synergistic. That is what is meant by our claim to celebrate diversity. We argue that political science is enriched by the variety of approaches that are adopted within the discipline. Each has something of considerable value to offer. But each benefits from its interaction with other approaches. Our book, in giving space and room to a variety of ways of doing political science, aims to provide the essential ingredients for an on-going exchange so that different approaches to the discipline can gain a baseline understanding of each other.

Table 1 below tries to capture the diversity of the approaches dealt with by this book. For each approach, its response to five issues is addressed. First, we consider its definition of politics, and then we look at what it regards as a scientific contribution and its preferred methods. We then examine its relationship to the world of politics and its attitude to normative political theory. Each of these issues will be dealt with thematically below but it is worth just spelling out the variety of approaches that constitute our understanding of political science at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

After a broad thematic discussion of ontology and epistemology the book begins with the behavioural approach to political science in Chapter 2. It is appropriate to start with this approach since the behavioural revolution perhaps can be seen as constituting the key development in the establishment of modern political science against which all other approaches have to situate themselves. Above all the behavioural movement decisively shifted attention away from the formal, legalistic study of political institutions and constitutions. That shift remains an accepted part of the terrain for all political scientists. Modern institutional analysis discussed in Chapter 4, for example, eschews a narrow focus on formal organisation for a wider definition of institution in terms of stable and recurring patterns of behaviour and, as such, is as interested in informal conventions as in formal constitutions. All empirically oriented political science shares with the behaviouralists a concern with the way politics operates in practice.

The second approach to be considered is rational choice theory (Chapter 3). It too claimed to bring a revolutionary new approach to the discipline. There can be little doubting the impact of this approach within

the discipline, with some of its advocates not being slow to argue that it constitutes the key approach for delivering a political science that is cumulative in its knowledge production and a powerful member of a wider group of social scientists unified in their approach in axioms and methods initially derived from economics. While some emphasise the overweening virtues of an approach which favours formal theory and mathematical rigour, others now see the rational choice approach as one among a variety of paths that can be taken. That is certainly the position taken by Ward in this book and one shared with the editors. The way of thinking and the challenge posed by rational choice analysis has something to offer all in the discipline but its claim to be a high priest is rightly regarded with scepticism. Indeed, Ward makes the argument that while rational choice in its mainstream formation may constitute an approach – defined by its particular set of assumptions – rational choice methods of analysis could perhaps better be seen as a toolkit from which a variety of approaches could draw.

The third style of political science that is a focus of attention in the book and Table 1 is institutional analysis. As Lowndes points out in Chapter 4, those interested in institutional studies may have found themselves out of favour as first behaviouralists and then rational choice advocates looked to blaze a trail for a new political science unencumbered by the old interest in institutions and constitutions. However, a new institutionalism has emerged, as a check to the undersocialised accounts of political action offered by behaviouralism and rational choice, that shares a core view that institutions significantly structure political relationships. There are many ways in which that interest in institutionalism has been expressed (see Chapter 14). As Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 11–12) suggest the new interest in institutions has indeed provided a basis for a rapprochement within the discipline with both behaviouralists and rational choice students giving recognition to the importance of institutions in the last decade or so.

Reconciliation is not the theme pursued by the next approach outlined in this book. As Randall points out in Chapter 5, feminist analysis has challenged political science on two fronts. First, it calls for a fully rounded account of the role of women in politics and, second, it raises fundamental questions about the way that politics is conceptualised, including the conventional distinction between public and private, and as such has major implications for the scope and boundaries of political science as a discipline.

The sense of challenge also emerges in the anti-foundational literature that has come to increased prominence within the discipline and is reviewed in Chapter 6 of the book as part of a broader account of the interpretist approach to political science. These writers oppose the view that there are foundations to the real world that can be discovered; rather

Table 1 Approaches to political science

	Scope of political studies	Understanding of the scientific claim	Attitude to normative political theory	Relationship to the practice of politics
Behaviouralism	Concentrates on processes of politics associated with mainstream politics and government	The generation of general laws and at a minimum the development of theoretical statements that can be falsified	In early years the behavioural revolution was keen to emphasise the difference between the new science and the old armchair theorising. Now more willing to tolerate	Claims to be value-free, neutral and detached
Rational choice theory	Concerned with conditions for collective action in mainstream political world	The generation of general laws and in particular laws with predictive power	Similar attitude to that of the behaviouralists: normative political theory is OK as a hobby	Claims to be able to offer value-free, expert, advice about how to organise politics
Institutionalism	Focus is on the rules, norms and values that govern political exchanges, tends to look at institutional arrangements in mainstream political world	Science is the production of organised knowledge. The best political science is empirically grounded, theoretically informed and reflective	Keen to make connections between empirical analysis and normative theory	Keen to make connections, sees itself as working alongside the practitioners of politics
Feminism	A broad process definition that recognises that personal can be political	A mixed range of responses to this issue but with strong tendencies towards anti-foundational and critical realist perspectives	Normative theory, like all aspects of political studies, needs to take gender issues seriously	Political engagement is strongly part of the feminist impulse
Anti-foundationalism (Interpretive theory)	Politics is a narrative contest that can take place in a wide variety of settings	Claims to knowledge are always provisional and contested. Understanding of human activity is inherently different to that of the physical world	Tends to the view that there is fusion between all types of theorising. Political analysis is essentially contested and has a necessarily normative content	A mixed range of responses but tendency is towards wry commentary on the narrative battles of the political world
Marxism	Politics is a struggle between social groups, in particular social classes	Critical realist: a focus on the discovery of unobservable structures that guide, but do not determine, historical events	Normative theory is at its most useful when it provides a guide to action: the point is to change the world	Committed to engagement in struggles of oppressed social groups or classes

their position is that the challenge is to present the world as it is interpreted by human thought and practice. Writers from within this tradition argue that understanding of actions and events cannot be read off from behaviour, assumptions about self-interested motivation or the constraining impact of institutions. For them the key to understanding politics is the world of diverse meanings and understandings in which it operates. A variety of approaches have formed part of a broad attempt to approach political science in a distinctive way. They share in a commitment to focus on interpreting politics through narrative, through the beliefs, ideas or discourses held in society.

The final element in the patchwork of approaches that we identify is Marxism. The broad political economy approach offered by this form of analysis is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, out of fashion. Yet, as Marsh argues in Chapter 7, there remains within Marxism a powerful set of analytical tools and ideas that will perhaps in a revised form most likely gain prominence in political analysis again, especially in the context of the continuing impact of global capitalism.

So, to answer the first question we posed very directly, there is no one best way to undertake political science. We have identified six main approaches but recognise that others could identify more. Our point is that we should celebrate diversity and enable the different elements of political science to understand one another better. We should also not forget that normative political theory continues to play a key role in political science and Buckler in Chapter 8 provides an overview of that theory. For now it is appropriate to move on to examine the issue of the content of political science.

What is politics? What is it that political scientists study?

When people say they 'study politics' they are making an ontological statement because there is an implicit understanding within the statement of what the polity is made of and its general nature. They are also making a statement that requires some clarification. In any introduction to a subject it is important to address the focus of its analytical attention. So, simply put, we should be able to answer the question: what is the nature of the political that political scientists claim to study? A discipline, you might think, would have a clear sense of its terrain of enquiry. Well, this is not so in respect of political science. Just as there are differences of approach to the subject, so there are differences about the terrain of study.

As Hay (2002: ch. 2) argues, ontological questions are about what is and what exists. Indeed he puts the point even more straightforwardly:

ontology asks what is there to know about. Although a great variety of ontological questions can be posed, a key concern for political scientists relates to the nature of the political. There are a range of other ontological or meta-theoretical questions such as the relationship between structure and agency and the role of ideas in explaining political outcomes that could also be addressed. Indeed, discussion devoted to these issues is featured later in the book in Chapters 13 and 14. For now our attention is focused on the 'primary' ontological question for political science, namely what is the nature of the political world?

There are two broad approaches to defining the political (Leftwich 1984; Hay 2002). The first defines the field of study by reference to an arena or particular set of institutions. Much of the interest of political scientists in the first three approaches that were identified above – behaviouralists, rational choice theorists and institutional analysis – is devoted to the formal operation of politics in the world of government and those who seek to influence it. This idea about what is political makes a lot of sense and relates to some everyday understandings. When people say they are fed up or bored with politics they usually mean that they have been turned off by the behaviour or performance of those politicians most directly involved in the arena.

The second approach to the definition of the political sees it as a social process that can be observed in a variety of settings. Politics is about more than what governments choose to do or not do; it is about the uneven distribution of power in society, how the struggle over power is conducted, and its impact on the creation and distribution of resources, life chances and well-being. This broader definition of the political is particularly associated with the other three approaches to political science identified earlier – feminism, anti-foundational work and Marxism. For feminists in particular there has been much emphasis on the idea that the personal is political, that issues defined as private by some are indeed deeply political in the sense that they involve the exercise of power and the practice of domination. As Randall argues in Chapter 5, feminists have been in the forefront of demands for a wider definition of politics with 'the emphasis on power relations between men and women and whenever and wherever they occur – as much, if not more, in the bed or the kitchen, for example, as in Westminster or Whitehall'. Marxists have also preferred generally a definition of politics that defines it in terms of a wider struggle between social groups in society. Anti-foundationalists are also more likely to see politics as a process conducted in a range of arenas.

The alarm bells might be ringing here since it appears that political scientists cannot even agree what the subject matter of their discipline should be. Yet, our view is that both arena and process definitions have their value. Moreover, all of the different approaches to political science

we identify could accommodate themselves to much shared ground on the issue of what is the political.

It would be fair to say that in the abstract all of the approaches to politics with which we are concerned could go along with a definition of politics as a struggle over power. Indeed, Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 7) suggest that a broad consensus could be built around a definition of politics along the lines: 'the constrained use of social power'. The political process is about collective choice without simple resort to force or violence. It is about what conditions and constrains those choices. It is about the use of that power and its consequences. It would cover unintended as well as intended acts. It would deal with passive as well as active practices. Politics enables individuals or groups to do some things that they would not otherwise be able to do and it also constrains individuals or groups from doing what it is they would otherwise do. Although the different approaches to political science may have their own take on that definition of politics – in the sense that how power is put into practice would be a matter of dispute between them – they could well be willing to sign up to such a definition. Although, as we argue below, it is still possible to identify different shades of opinion.

Politics is much broader than what governments do but there is something especially significant about political processes that are or could be considered to be part of the public domain. As Randall points out, the slogan 'the personal is political' has sometimes been misinterpreted as 'only the personal is political', whereas feminist analysis is and should be deeply concerned about the relative underinvolvement of women in formal politics as well as emerging forms of informal involvement in social movements, grass-roots organisations and community groups. In a pragmatic sense it is probably true to say that most political scientists tend to concentrate their efforts in terms of analysis and research on the more collective and public elements of power struggles. The key is to retain a sense of the collective or public arena that takes you beyond the narrow machinations of the political elite.

In Table 1 below, we suggest that different shades of opinion are held by our six approaches to political science with respect to the definition of the political. All share an idea of politics as a power struggle in a collective arena but each expresses the idea in a different way. Behaviouralists tend to look at the political world as a system (including public opinion, interest groups and so on) oriented towards the process of formal government. For rational choice analysis the key political question is how the conditions for political action are created: what drives self-interested individuals to compromise or acquiesce to a collective political arrangement. The institutionalists in turn will look for the rules, norms and values that govern political exchanges or struggles. For those engaged in feminist

analysis the gender dimension of political inequalities is the key: the personal is political in that sense. For anti-foundationalists politics is a struggle between narratives. For many Marxists the key struggle is that driven by the economic division between classes.

What is a scientific approach to politics?

As Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 9) comment, 'much ink has been spilt over the question of whether, or in what sense, the study of politics is or is not truly a science. The answer largely depends upon how much one tries to load into the term "science"'. If one adopts what is called a minimalist approach (Stoker 1995: 3), the question can be answered fairly straightforwardly, namely, that political science is science in the sense that it offers ordered knowledge based on systematic inquiry. There is no reason to doubt that political science in all its forms has or could achieve that level of knowledge.

As such, there may be basic agreement among all (except, perhaps, for a few of the more extreme feminists or anti-foundationalists) that political science concerns the production of systematic knowledge about the political. However, there are some fundamentally different views on this issue of what is politics taken by the approaches that we consider in this book and these differences are worth some consideration here.

What is at stake here is the various epistemological positions taken by the different approaches. As Marsh and Furlong argue in Chapter 1, ontology is concerned with what we can know about the world and epistemology with how we can know it. There is a fundamental difference between foundationalists, who argue that a real world exists independently of our knowledge of it, and anti-foundationalists, who argue that the world is socially constructed. In epistemological terms, positivists, who are foundationalists, believe that we can establish the real world through empirical observations. As such, they would claim that they are in tune with modernist scientific methods. In contrast, interpretists believe we can only interpret the world; that is, establish an understanding of that world. This position can call on a long tradition of political studies and draws inspiration from more recent post-modern thought.

Among foundationalists there is a further distinction to be drawn between positivism and realism. Positivists look to follow the style of the natural scientists and establish causal relationships developing explanatory or even predictive models. The realists in contrast do not privilege direct observation. In their view, deep structures which cannot be directly observed have crucial effects on outcomes. Similarly, as Bevir and Rhodes

point out in Chapter 6, there are a number of different positions within anti-foundationalist and interpretist thought.

The behavioural and rational choice approaches are the most obviously positivist. The former sees its task as to produce knowledge that allows the development of general laws about the ways things work, the latter places more of an emphasis on the predictive capabilities of its models. In this book Chapter 6 clearly reflects an anti-foundationlist and interpretist position. However, both institutionalism and feminism also have many authors who operate from within an interpretist position (see Chapters 4 and 5). The Marxist camp is dominated by the realist position, although more recently it has given some ground to the interpretist argument (see Chapters 6 and 7). At the same time, both institutionalism and feminism have realist strands, as is clear in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

This last point is an appropriate one with which to concude this section. As Marsh and Furlong will elaborate in Chapter 1, the epistemological positions of the different approaches reviewed in this book have been subject to change and development. Different parts of the discipline have listened to and learnt from each other. We would support the idea of further dialogue. However, it cannot be denied that political scientists are more fundamentally divided over what constitutes science than over what constitutes politics.

Connecting to the world of politics

If you say you are a Professor of Politics in social settings people are inclined to one of several reactions. Some simply look perplexed, uncertain what to say next, others try quickly to move the subject on to another topic on the grounds that it is unpleasant or uninteresting to talk about politics, some tell you in detail their opinions of politicians or their views on particular political issues, and some suggest that in some way you must be connected to the political process. Some very kindly assume you know a lot about politics and the way it works and ask you what your job involves.

In practice, rather like the rest of the population, political scientists have different views of political issues and values. That is as it should be; as individuals the political position of political scientists is a matter for them. But, at a more abstract level what should be the relationship between the world of political analysis and the practice of politics in the world?

There are some that hold the view that the job of political scientists begins and ends with their description and analysis of politics. It is probably true to say that much political science is written in such a way that it would be difficult for those involved in politics to relate to, or gain

much from, the work or the understanding that is presented. Does that matter? Some may feel there is no issue to be addressed. Why should political science care if its work is useful or used? Others might take the view that a discipline that studied politics but had nothing to say to those involved in politics or who might be involved, if politics was constructed in a different way, was somehow failing. The question is: if you are studying an aspect of human society, as political scientists do, what should be the relationship to that human activity?

A related question is what is the stance of political science regarding the normative issues raised by politics? Should the discipline restrict itself to studying what is rather than examine what should be? A number of the concepts used by empirically oriented political scientists, such as democracy or justice, are contested or disputed. So, there are also issues about the appropriate connection between empirical and normative theorising that need to be considered.

Given the theme of this introduction thus far, the reader will perhaps not be surprised to learn that different approaches to political science have tended to develop different answers to the questions about their attitude to normative theorising and their relationship to the practice of politics. Again Table 1 presents the arguments in summary form.

We begin again with behaviouralism that has, in the past at least, taken a stance that suggests that there is a great divide between normative theorising and its practice of political science. That armchair debates about the way politics should be organised would give way to a scientific understanding of the way it worked in reality was the vision offered by many early behaviouralists. The critique by logical positivists of traditional political philosophy was taken to heart by many behaviouralists. That critique, as Buckler notes in Chapter 8, identified two forms of knowledge, one driven by empirical inquiry that was the realm of science and the other that dealt with investigation into the logical properties of, and relations between, concepts. As Buckler comments: 'the job of the philosopher, then, was mainly one of linguistic and analytical clarification, clearing up the conceptual errors and intellectual confusions that historically had inhibited a clear understanding of the world'. The traditional normative debates of political philosophy were of the past, something that the new discipline of political science was to leave behind. The job of the philosopher was to do some ground-clearing conceptual clarification for the new science of politics.

The new science of politics was keen to stress also that it was beyond politics: its claim was to value-free neutrality in its analysis. During the professional day its exponents are presented as simply scientific experts; what they do in the evenings as citizens to pursue politic issues is a matter of personal preference and choice. It was nothing to do with their day job

any more than it would be if a physical scientist decided to serve as a local councillor or join a community campaign.

Modern behaviouralists, as Sanders makes clear in Chapter 2, are not as dismissive of the concerns of political philosophy as they once were. Hostility has given way to tolerance, driven in part by a recognition that many of the concepts that political scientists use are value-loaded. So what is required for effective analysis is something more than conceptual fine-tuning. Moreover, it recognised that there are fundamental issues that cannot be resolved by empirical work alone.

The claims of behaviouralists' work to be value-free in the analysis of politics have also been subject to sustained challenge. For example, as Randall points out, some political scientists have been 'happy to reproduce stereotypical and sexist understandings of woman's nature'.

The claims to value-freedom have been rightly ridiculed and so such claims are now rarely made explicitly, although there is an assumption held among many behaviouralists, and in fairness many other political scientists, that the connection between the discipline and the world of politics is appropriately detached: they are neutral, observers of the political world, happy to offer their thoughts to the media, policy-makers and community groups as experts, but otherwise not engaged.

Rational choice theorists share much the same territory as modern behaviouralists on the issue of their connection to the wider world of politics. They, if anything, are more inclined to be engaged. Rather like the economists from which their methods are drawn, they do think that the predictive modelling of their approach makes them especially suitable for the role of expert adviser. As to the issue of political philosophy, the position of rational choice theorists might be: well, if it satisfies some individual's utility function who are they to object. However, it can be nothing more than a hobby.

Those engaged in institutional analysis are likely to adopt a mixed range of responses to issues outlined above. The reaction to normative political theory is likely to be a positive one, especially where it might be possible to open up a dialogue about the connection between desired normative political conditions and the institutional arrangements that are most likely to promote their achievement or ingrain their embodiment.

Institutionalists may be happy to stay as simply observers of the political scene. If they get involved it is perhaps more likely that it will be as engaged and explicitly value-laden advocates standing alongside others engaged in political battles. Their claim will be to offer a particular and insightful analysis, but there will be no pretence at value-neutrality. They will be policy advocates working with others in a messy, uncertain world of political choices and options.

Feminists, in contrast to all of the other approaches so far considered, would have to regard themselves as engaged. The struggle for gender equality is in part fought out in the discipline of political science itself (including the demand that normative political theory needs to be feminised) and there is considerable legitimacy given to political involvement in the wider world of feminist politics. Marxism too would share a commitment to making a connection between theory and practice. There is an expectation that at some point there should be a connection between intellectual endeavour and political involvement. As for the broad group of anti-foundational writers it is difficult to generalise, but perhaps the most common position is one where the relationship could be described as the academic offering wry commentary on the practice of politics.

Is there a standard method for undertaking political science?

It is probably true that by now most readers can guess the answer to this question. There is no one method of acquiring knowledge about politics but rather a variety of methods. Methodological issues are addressed directly in Chapters 9 through 12.

There is a broad distinction that can be drawn between qualitative and quantitative methods. The former stretches from observation through interviews to focus group discussion as ways to find out about politics. The latter involves the collection of data on a repeated incidence of a political phenomenon and using statistical techniques to analyse those data. In short, qualitative data collection leans towards focusing on a few cases, while quantitative work usually deals with many cases.

The distinction between methods is sometimes associated with different approaches to political science. Broadly speaking, behavioural and rational choice approaches tend to favour quantitative methods, as these are more likely to provide data to test generalising theories that these approaches favour. Qualitative work is more obviously associated with interpretive or anti-foundational theories as for this approach the crucial thing is data production that is likely to reveal the meanings and understandings that people attach to politics. Marxism would draw on different types of data depending on the question posed. Feminism would perhaps tend to favour qualitative data collection, although there are feminist political scientists who use quantitative data.

This simplistic distinction is not the main message of Chapters 9 and 10 on qualitative and quantitative methods respectively. Rather, both authors are at pains to point out the range and subtlety of the methods available

under their broad headings. Both point to the challenges associated with using data of either sort. The argument of both Devine and John is that political science is coming of age and trying to develop a greater sophistication in the way it collects and uses data of whatever variety.

The association between certain types of data collection and analysis and approaches to political science should not be pushed too far. In practice political scientists using different types of approach are increasingly using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data in order to answer research questions. Indeed this theme is the focus of Chapter 11 by Read and Marsh.

Chapter 12 addresses another key methodological issue, namely the role of comparative work. The comparative method takes advantage of the position that in the world there is a mix of political systems, institutions and actors. Comparing provides the opportunity to test ideas about the way that politics works by looking at issues in the context of the 'natural laboratory' of the mixed systems of the world. There are a number of difficult issues to be addressed in using the comparative method, as Hopkin points out in Chapter 12, but it is difficult to think of a political science that could do without it.

Conclusion

The aim of this introduction has been to get you into the foothills of understanding the political science range. We cannot promise that the whole of the book is going to be as easy to read. As you scale the heights of political science it is going to be hard going at times. However we hope that each of the chapters is well signposted and structured. In addition, each also provides a guide to further reading to help you with your studies.

Chapter 1

A Skin, not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science

DAVID MARSH AND PAUL FURLONG

This chapter introduces the reader to the key issues that underpin what we do as social or political scientists. Each social scientist's orientation to their subject is shaped by their ontological and epistemological position. Most often those positions are implicit rather than explicit, but, regardless of whether they are acknowledged, they shape the approach to theory and the methods which the social scientist utilises. At first these issues seem difficult but our major point is that they are not issues that can be avoided (for a similar view see Blyth, Chapter 14). They are like a skin not a sweater: they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit. In our view, all students of political science should recognise and acknowledge their own ontological and epistemological positions and be able to defend these positions against critiques from other positions. This means they need to understand the alternative positions on these fundamental questions. As such, this chapter has two key aims. First, we will introduce these ontological and epistemological questions in as accessible a way as possible in order to allow the reader who is new to these issues to reflect on their own position. Second, this introduction is crucial to the readers of this book because the authors of the subsequent chapters address these issues and they inform the subject matter of their chapters. As such, this basic introduction is also essential for readers who want fully to appreciate the substantive content of this book.

The chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section describes what we mean by these two terms 'ontology' and 'epistemology' and considers briefly why these questions are important. The second section then outlines the different positions on ontology and epistemology and the arguments which have been put forward for and against these positions. Finally, we shall illustrate how these different positions shape the approaches that researchers take to their research by focusing on research in two broad areas: globalisation and multilevel governance.

Ontology and epistemology

Ontological and epistemological positions are related, but need to be separated. To put it crudely, one's ontological position affects, but far from determines, one's epistemological position.

Ontology

Ontological questions are prior because they deal with the very nature of 'being'; literally, an ontology is a theory of 'being' (the word derives from the Greek for 'existence'). This sounds difficult, but really it is not. The key question is whether there is a 'real' world 'out there' that is independent of our knowledge of it. For example, are there essential differences between genders, classes or races that exist in all contexts and at all times?

A simple illustration easily makes the point. Over the last ten years John Gray's book *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus* (1992) has sold seven million copies in the USA and millions more in forty countries worldwide. He argues that men and women are very different and that men and women can only understand and deal with one another better if they recognise this fact of life. This book takes a clear ontological position; there are fundamental differences between men and women that are features of their very existence. These differences persist over time and are common across cultures. This is an essentialist or a foundationalist ontological position. So, its proponents argue that there are essential differences of 'being' that provide the foundations upon which social life is built.

Of course, this is a contentious position; one which is strongly attacked by many, if not most, feminists. They believe that the differences between men and women are socially constructed. As such, they are not essential differences but are particular to a given culture and time. They are the product of patriarchy, in which male dominance shapes the culture and values of society, affects patterns of socialisation and perpetuates gender inequality. This argument reflects a different ontological position that is anti-foundationalist and emphasises the social construction of social phenomena.

Epistemology

If an ontological position reflects the researcher's view about the nature of the world, their epistemological position reflects their view of what we can

know about the world and how we can know it; literally an epistemology is a theory of knowledge. Again, this sounds difficult, but the basic concerns are not too difficult. There are two key questions. Can an observer identify 'real' or 'objective' relations between social phenomena? If so, how? The first question itself subsumes two issues. Initially, it takes us back to ontology; if one is an anti-foundationalist, then one argues that there is not a 'real' world, which exists independently of the meaning which actors attach to their action, to discover. At the same time, such an anti-foundationalist would also suggest that no observer can be 'objective' because they live in the social world and are affected by the social constructions of 'reality'. This is sometimes called the double hermeneutic; the world is interpreted by the actors (one hermeneutic level) and their interpretation is interpreted by the observer (a second hermeneutic level).

The second question raises another important, and clearly related, issue. To the extent that we can establish 'real' relationships between social phenomena, can we do this simply through direct observation, or are there some relationships which 'exist' but are not directly observable? The answers one gives to these questions shapes one's epistemological position.

Of course, there are different ways of classifying epistemological positions and there is no agreement as to the best way. Probably the most common classification distinguishes between scientific (sometimes positivist) and hermeneutic (or interpretist) positions. We shall begin with a brief review of that distinction, before proposing an alternative, which distinguishes between positivist, realist and interpretist positions.

Scientific versus hermeneutic approaches

Social science was influenced by the ideas of science as the nomenclature clearly indicates. In particular, the *empiricist* tradition played a crucial role in the development of social science. David Hume argued that knowledge starts from our senses. On the basis of such direct experience we could develop generalisations about the relationships between physical phenomena. The aim was to develop causal statements which specified that, under a given set of conditions, there would be regular and predictable outcomes (on this see Hollis and Smith 1990: ch. 3). The adherents of the scientific tradition saw social science as analogous to science. In ontological terms they were foundationalists; they thought there was a real world 'out there' which was external to agents. Their focus was upon identifying the *causes* of social behaviour. The emphasis was upon *explanation* and many felt that the use of rigorous 'scientific' methods would allow social scientists to develop laws, similar in status to scientific laws, which would hold across time and space.

In methodological terms, the scientific tradition was greatly influenced by logical positivism that posited a very straightforward characterisation of the form of scientific investigation. As Hollis and Smith put it (1990: 50):

> To detect the regularities in nature, propose a generalisation, deduce what it implies for the next case and observe whether the prediction succeeds. If it does, no consequent action is needed; if it does not, then either discard the generalisation or amend it and [test the] fresh [predictions].

In contrast, there is an alternative hermeneutic (the word derives from the Greek for 'to interpret') or interpretist tradition. The adherents of this position are anti-foundationalists, believing that the world is socially constructed. They focus upon the *meaning* of behaviour. The emphasis is upon *understanding*, rather than *explanation*. As such, in the interpretist tradition it is not possible to establish causal relationships between phenomena that hold across time and space.

Positivist, realist and interpretist positions

We prefer this classification because the scientific tradition identified by Hollis and Smith conflates two distinct positions, positivism and realism. Positivists adhere to a foundationalist ontology and are concerned to establish causal relationships between social phenomema, thus developing explanatory, and indeed predictive, models. The realist is also foundationalist in ontological terms. However, realists, unlike positivists, do not privilege direct observation. The realist believes that there are deep structural relationships between social phenomena which cannot be directly observed, but which are crucial for any explanation of behaviour. So, as an example, a realist might argue that patriarchy as a structure cannot be directly observed, although we can see many of the consequences of it; we return to this example later.

The distinction between positivist, realist and interpretist approaches is examined in much more depth in the next section. However, the key point here is that any classification that we adopt would annoy some social scientists. We use this particular distinction because we are realists and, as such, do not like the conflation between positivism and realism involved in the first distinction. However, many other authors would question our distinction. In particular, many, like Bevir and Rhodes (see below) would want to make further distinctions within the tradition of interpretive theory. The point is that any way of classifying epistemological positions can be contested; we choose one, but are aware of the criticism of it. In addition, we shall deal with many of those criticisms when we look at the variants within the three positions we identify.

Why are such distinctions important?

In our view, ontological and epistemological concerns cannot, and should not, be ignored or downgraded. Three points are important here:

1. First, these concerns should not be put in what the Australians, with typical directness, call the 'too hard basket'. Certainly, the issues involved are not easy, but neither are they difficult, if they are explained simply and with appropriate examples.
2. Second, ontological and epistemological positions should not be treated like a sweater that can be 'put on' when we are addressing such philosophical issues and 'taken off' when we are doing research. In our view, the dominance of a fairly crude positivist epistemology throughout much of the postwar period encouraged many social scientists to dismiss ontological questions and regard epistemological issues as more or less resolved, with only the details left to be decided by those interested in such matters. Such social scientists have tended to acknowledge the importance of epistemology without considering it necessary to deal with it in detail; positivism has been regarded as a comforting sweater that can be put on where necessary. In contrast, we would argue that epistemology, to say nothing of ontology, is far from being a closed debate.
3. Third, researchers cannot adopt one position at one time for one project and another on another occasion for a different project. These positions are not interchangeable because they reflect fundamental different approaches to what social science is and how we do it. This is the key point. As we pointed out in the introduction, a researcher's epistemological position is reflected in what is studied, how it is studied and the status the researcher gives to their findings. So, a positivist looks for causal relationships, tends to prefer quantitative analysis (for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology, see Chapter 11) and wants to produce 'objective' and generalisable findings. A researcher from within the interpretist tradition is concerned with understanding, not explanation, focuses on the meaning that actions have for agents, tends to use qualitative evidence and offers their results as one interpretation of the relationship between the social phenomena studied. Realism is less easy to classify in this way. The realists are looking for causal relationships, but think that many important relationships between social phenomena cannot be observed. This means they may use quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data will only be appropriate for those relationships that are directly observable. In contrast, the unobservable relationships can only be established

indirectly; we can observe other relationships which, our theory tells us, are the result of those unobservable prelationships. We return to these issues in the next section.

Different approaches to ontology and epistemology

Here we outline the positivist, the interpretist and the realist positions in more detail. We shall focus on: the major criticisms of the positions; the variations within these positions; and the way the positions have changed over time. At the outset, however, it is important to emphasise that the distinctions between the positions, and more specifically that between interpretism and realism, are not clear-cut.

Positivism

The core of positivism is fairly straightforward, although of course there are variants within it:

- Positivism is based upon a foundationalist ontology. So, to the positivist, like the realist, but unlike those from the interpretist position, the world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
- To the positivist, natural science and social science are broadly analogous. We can establish regular relationships between social phenomena, using theory to generate hypotheses which can be tested by direct observation. In this view, and in clear contrast to the realist, there are no deep structures that cannot be observed. Traditionally, positivism contended that there is no appearance/reality dichotomy and that the world is real and not socially constructed. So, direct observation can serve as an independent test of the validity of a theory. Crucially, an observer can be objective in the way they undertake such observations. Researchers from the interpretist tradition rarely accept any notion of objectivity. Realists accept that all observation is mediated by theory (to the realist, theory plays the crucial role in allowing the researcher to distinguish between those social phenomena which are directly observable and those which are not).
- To positivists the aim of social science is to make causal statements; in their view it is possible to, and we should attempt to, establish causal relationships between social phenomena. They share this aim with realists, while interpretists deny the possibility of such statements.
- Positivists also argue that it is possible to separate empirical questions – that is, questions about what is – from normative questions – that is, questions about what should be. Traditionally, positivists thought that

the goal of social science was to pursue empirical questions, while philosophy, metaphysics or religion pursued the normative questions. Because we can separate empirical and normative questions, it is possible for social science to be objective and value-free. Realists and, especially, those from within the interpretist tradition would reject that proposition.

Many social scientists are positivists, although much of the positivism is implicit rather than explicit. The behavioural revolution in the social sciences in the 1960s, dealt with by David Sanders in Chapter 2, was an attempt to introduce scientific method into the study of society. It was an explicit reaction to political theory, which it saw as concerned with normative questions, and institutionalism, which it saw as lacking theoretical and methodological rigour. In contrast, it was based upon a foundationalist ontology and, most often, a quantitative methodology (but see below and Chapter 10). The view was that a social 'science' was possible if we followed the scientific method; deriving hypotheses from theory and then testing them in an attempt to falsify them. We needed 'objective' measures of our social phenomena, our variables; as such, we would focus upon 'hard' data – from government statistics, election results and so on – rather than soft data – from interviews or participant observation. So, for example, if a positivist was studying political participation, they would be interested in measuring the level of voting, party or pressure group membership, direct action or whatever, and relating it to demographic variables such as class, gender, race and education. The aim would be to establish the precise nature of the relationship between these variables and participation in order to produce causal models. We shall return to this example later. The key point here is that, as always, the ontological and epistemological position adopted had clear methodological implications.

The criticism of positivism takes two broad forms. The first line of criticism broadly argues that, in following the methods of science, positivists misinterpret how science really proceeds. Two lines of argument have been particularly important here. First, there is the pragmatist position of Quine (1961) who develops two crucial critiques of positivism (for a fuller exposition see Hollis and Smith 1990: 55–7; they deal with a third, less important, criticism):

(i) Quine argues that any knowledge we derive from the five senses is mediated by the concepts we use to analyse it, so there is no way of classifying, or even describing, experience without interpreting it.
(ii) This means that theory and experiment are not simply separable, rather theory affects both the facts we focus on and how we interpret them. This, in turn, may affect the conclusions we draw if the facts

appear to falsify the theory. As such, if we observe 'facts' which are inconsistent with the theory, we might decide that the facts are wrong rather than that the theory is wrong. Of course, this undermines the notion that observation alone can serve to falsify a theory.

Second, there is Kuhn's view (1970) that, at any given time, science tends to be dominated by a particular paradigm that is unquestioned and which affects the questions scientists ask and how they interpret what they observe (for a fuller discussion, see Hollis and Smith 1990: 57–61). Consequently, scientific investigation is not 'open', as positivism implies, rather certain conclusions are almost unthinkable. There is a 'paradigm shift' when a lot of empirical observation leads certain, brave, scientists to question the dominant paradigm, but until that time, and for the most part, scientists discard observations which do not fit (obviously this fits well with the second of Quine's criticisms above) and embrace the results which confirm the paradigm.

The second main line of criticism of positivism is more particular to social science. It argues that there are obvious differences between social and physical or natural phenomena that make social 'science' impossible. Three differences are particularly important. First, social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they shape. So, for example, marriage is a social institution or structure, but it is also a lived experience, particularly, although not exclusively, for those who are married. This lived experience affects agents' understanding of the institution and also helps change it. Second, and related, social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of agents' views of what they are doing in the activity. People are reflexive; they reflect on what they are doing and often change their actions in the light of that reflection. This leads us to the third difference. Social structures, unlike natural structures, change as a result of the actions of agents; in most senses the social world varies across time and space. Some positivist social scientists minimise these differences, but, to the extent they are accepted, they point towards a more interpretist epistemological position.

Many positivists avoid these critiques which are put in the 'too hard basket'. However, the more sophisticated positivists are aware of these criticisms and the position has changed significantly as a result. Fortunately, this volume boasts two sophisticated behaviouralists who are positivists, Sanders and John. It is particularly worth examining David Sanders' view in a little more detail because it represents an excellent example of the modern, more sophisticated, positivist position. Sanders (Chapter 2) accepts he has been strongly influenced by the positivist position, but acknowledges the 'ferocious philosophical criticism' to which it was subjected. He argues that 'post-behaviouralists', who might also be

called 'post-positivists': acknowledge the interdependence of theory and observation; recognise that normative questions are important and not always easy to separate from empirical questions; and accept that other traditions have a key role to play in political and social analysis. As such, this post-positivism has moved a significant way from more traditional positivism, largely as a result of the type of criticisms outlined here.

However, the ontological and epistemological problems have not gone away, rather they have been elided. Two quotes from Sanders illustrate the point. First, he argues (see Chapter 2: 51):

> Modern behaviouralists – 'post-behaviouralists' – simply prefer to subject their own theoretical claims to empirical tests. They also suspect that scholars working in non-empirical traditions are never able to provide a satisfactory answer to the crucial question: 'How would you know if you were wrong?'

Later he continues (Chapter 2: 54):

> For modern behaviouralists, the ultimate test of a good theory is still whether or not it is consistent with observation – with the available empirical evidence. Modern behaviouralists are perfectly prepared to accept that different theoretical positions are likely to produce different observations. They insist however, that, whatever 'observations' are implied by a particular theoretical perspective, those observations must be used in order to conduct a systematic empirical test of the theory that is being posited.

This is a sophisticated statement of a positivist epistemological position, but it is still essentially positivist. The aim is to use observation (of whatever type) to test hypothesised relationships between the social phenomena studied. Research from within other traditions must still be judged against the positivists' criteria: 'observation must be used in order to conduct a systematic empirical test of the theory that is being posited'. Yet, that is not a standard most researchers from within an interpretist tradition could accept (even Bevir and Rhodes 1999 could only do so with major qualifications), because they do not believe that direct observation can be objective and used as a test of 'reality'. Most realists would also have a problem with Sanders' position because they would see many of the key relationships as unobservable.

One other aspect of Sanders' position is important here. He accepts that interpretation and meaning are important, which might suggest that the differences between positivist and interpretist traditions are beginning to dissolve. So, Sanders argues (Chapter 2: 53), in criticising prior studies of voting behaviour: 'There are other areas – relating to the way in which individuals reflect, to a greater or lesser degree, upon themselves – where

behavioural research has simply not dared to tread.' He recognises that such factors might, or might not, be important, but emphasises that they would be difficult to study empirically. However, the crucial point is that Sanders wants to treat interpretation and meaning as intervening variables. In this view, how a voter understands the parties and their own position may affect their voting behaviour. At best, this acknowledges only one aspect of the double hermeneutic; the interpretist tradition would argue that we also need to acknowledge the subjectivity of the observer.

So, positivism has changed in response to criticism. Post-positivism is much less assertive that there is only one way of doing social science. However, it still emphasises explanation, rather than understanding, and the primacy of direct observation. In our terms, it is still foundationalist and firmly located in the scientific tradition.

The interpretist position

The interpretist tradition is the obvious 'other' of positivism. However, it is a much broader church than positivism and much of this subsection will deal with its variants. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin with an outline of the core of the position.

- In the interpretist tradition researchers reject the notion that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it. Rather, they contend that the world is socially or discursively constructed. This view is diametrically opposed to positivism, but shares certain features with some modern variants of realism. In ontological terms, then, this position is anti-foundationalist.
- This means that for researchers working within this tradition social phenomena do not exist independently of our interpretation of them; rather it is this interpretation/understanding of social phenomena which affects outcomes. As such, it is the interpretations/meanings of social phenomena that are crucial; interpretations/meanings which can only be established and understood within discourses or traditions. Consequently, we should focus on identifying those discourses or traditions and establishing the interpretations and meanings they attach to social phenomena.
- However, we must also acknowledge that 'objective' analysis is impossible. Social 'scientists' (of course interpretists would not use this term) are not privileged, but themselves operate within discourses or traditions. Consequently, knowledge is theoretically or discursively laden. As such, this position acknowledges the double hermeneutic.

This position has clear methodological implications. It argues that there is no objective truth, that the world is socially constructed and that the role

of social 'scientists' [sic] is to study those social constructions. Quantitative methods can be blunt instruments and may produce misleading data. In contrast, we need to utilise qualitative methods – interviews, focus groups, vignettes and so on – to help us establish how people understand their world. So, for example, someone operating from within this tradition studying political participation would start by trying to establish how people understand 'the political' and 'political' participation

The major criticism of the interpretist tradition comes, unsurprisingly, from positivists, though some realists would agree with elements of that critique. To positivists, the interpretist tradition merely offers opinions or subjective judgements about the world. As such, there is no basis on which to judge the validity of their knowledge claims. One person's view of the world, and of the relationship between social phenomena within it, is as good as another's view. To many positivists, this means that such research is akin to history, or even fiction, whereas they aspire to a science of society. It is difficult for someone in the interpretist tradition to answer this accusation, because it is based on a totally different ontological view and reflects a different epistemology and, thus, a different view of what social science is about. However, as we shall see, most researchers do believe that it is possible to generalise, if only in a limited sense. Perhaps more interestingly, Bevir and Rhodes (forthcoming) attempt to defend their approach against this positivist critique by establishing a basis on which they can make knowledge claims; on which they can claim that one interpretation, or narrative, is superior to another. We shall return to their argument below.

Bevir and Rhodes (forthcoming: ch. 2) distinguish between the hermeneutic and postmodern, or post-structuralist, strands in the interpretist position. In essence, the hermeneutic tradition is idealist; it argues that we need to understand the meanings people attach to social behaviour. So, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of texts and actions. This involves the use of ethnographic techniques (participant observation, transcribing texts, keeping diaries and so on) to produce what Geertz (1973) calls 'thick description'. As Bevir and Rhodes put it, quoting Geertz, the aim is to establish 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to'. However, ethnographers do generalise. They develop a narrative about the past based upon the meanings which the actions had for social actors. Then, on the basis of this 'thick description', they offer an interpretation of what this tells us about the society. The point is that these interpretations are always partial, in both senses of the world, and provisional; they are not 'true'.

More recently, as Bevir and Rhodes (forthcoming) emphasise, post-structuralism and postmodernism have provided a powerful challenge to foundationalism in both philosophy and social science. Yet, as Bevir and

Rhodes also point out, this variant of the interpretist tradition is itself so diverse that it is difficult, if not impossible, to characterise. They overcome this problem by focusing on the work of Michel Foucault, who is perhaps the best-known writer in this broad tradition. He, like most post-structuralists and postmodernists, is a strong opponent of foundationalism and the modernisation project associated with the Enlightenment. This project argues that: the basis of human knowledge is direct experience; as such, it is possible to develop an 'objective' view of the 'real' world (thus, it denies both elements of the double hermeneutic); language is transparent or neutral; and that human history is inevitably progressive, with present knowledge building on past knowledge to improve our information about the world and our ability to control it.

In contrast, Foucault argues that experience is acquired within a prior discourse. As such, language is crucial because institutions and actions only acquire a meaning through language. Thus, as Bevir and Rhodes (forthcoming) argue, for Foucault: 'to understand an object or action, political scientists have to interpret it in the wider discourse of which it is part'. This means that, as Bevir and Rhodes stress, it is the social discourse, rather than the beliefs of individuals, which are crucial to Foucault's version of the interpretist position. The identification of that discourse, and the role it plays in structuring meanings, is thus the key concern of those adopting this approach (for an example of this broad approach in use see Howarth (1995).

Bevir and Rhodes (forthcoming) develop their own take on the interpretist tradition. It is particularly interesting because it directly addresses the key issue raised in the positivist critique of this tradition. They argue that social science is about the development of narratives, not theories. As such, they stress the importance of understanding and the impossibility of absolute knowledge claims, but they want to explain and they defend a limited notion of objectivity.

Broadly, Bevir and Rhodes are within the hermeneutic, rather than the postmodern, or post-structuralist, stream of the interpretist tradition. As such, they follow Geertz and others in arguing that it is possible to produce explanations within the interpretist tradition. However, their understanding of explanation is very different from that of a positivist. In their view, the researcher can produce an explanation of an event or of the relationships between social phenomena. But, this explanation is built upon their interpretation of the meanings the actors involved gave to their actions. What is produced is a narrative which is particular, to that time and space, and partial, being based on a subjective interpretation of the views of, most likely, only some of the actors involved. Consequently, any such narrative must be provisional; there are no absolute truth claims.

However, Bevir and Rhodes do wish to make some, more limited, knowledge claims. They argue (forthcoming): 'Although we do not have access to pure facts that we can use to declare particular interpretations to be true or false, we can still hang on to the idea of objectivity.' They suggest that a field of study 'is a co-operative intellectual *practice*, with a *tradition* of historically produced norms, rules, conventions and standards of excellence that remain subject to critical debate, and with a *narrative* content that gives meaning to it' (original emphasis).

They continue:

[Practice, tradition and narrative provide] for a negotiated and dynamic set of standards through which rational debate and argumentation between proponents of rival perspectives or approaches is possible [where] these standards are historically embedded within social practices, traditions and narratives which provide 'embedded reasons' … for judging an argument true or false or an action right or wrong.

Such criteria are not universal or objective; rather, they are 'shared criteria for assessing … knowledge claims'. To Bevir and Rhodes, postmodernism errs in failing to acknowledge 'significant, grounded rationality' that is to be found in these practices and traditions.

In Bevir and Rhodes' view, such knowledge claims are not self-referential because they can be 'reconfirmed' at three distinct points:

The first is when we translate our concepts for fieldwork: that is, are they meaningful to practitioners and users and if not, why not? The second is when we reconstruct narratives from the conversations: that is, is the story logical and consistent with the data? And the third is when we redefine and translate our concepts because of the academic community's judgement on the narratives: that is, does the story meet the agreed knowledge criteria?

Overall, they argue:

To overcome this difficulty, we should conceive of objective knowledge, less as what our community happens to agree on, and more as a normative standard embedded in a practice of criticising and comparing rival accounts of 'agreed facts'. The anti-foundational nature of this practice lies in its appeal, not to given facts, but to those agreed in a particular community or conversation. In addition, and of key importance, the normative, critical bite of our approach lies in conducting the comparison by the rules of intellectual honesty. These rules originate in anti-foundationalism and not in a straightforward acceptance of the norms of the relevant community or conversation.

As we can see then, there are a number of variants within the interpretist tradition. However, they are all anti-foundationalist and critical of positivism. These approaches have become much more common in political science since the 1970s for a number of reasons. First, increasingly philosophical critiques have led to the questioning of positivism. Second, the postmodern turn in social science has had an affect on political science, although much less so than in sociology. Third, normative political theory has changed fundamentally. Historically, it was foundationalist; the aim was to establish some absolute notion of the good or of justice. As Buckler argues in Chapter 8, that is no longer the case. Some normative political theorists have been influenced by postmodernism, again variously defined, and more by the work of Quine and others. Now, most political theorists are anti-foundationalists or, at the very least, have a very limited conception of any universal foundations. Fourth, as Randall shows in Chapter 5, much, but by no means all, feminist thought has been strongly influenced by postmodernism; it is anti-foundationalist and operates within the interpretist tradition. As such, we can see the influence of this interpretist tradition very broadly across political science.

Realism

Realism shares an ontological position with positivism, but, in epistemological terms, modern realism has more in common with relativism. The core views of classical realism are again fairly clear and owe much to Marx's work:

- To realists, the world exists independently of our knowledge of it. In ontological terms they, like positivists, are foundationalists.
- Again like positivists, realists contend that social phenomena/structures do have causal powers, so we can make causal statements.
- However, unlike positivists, realists contend that not all social phenomena, and the relationships between them, are directly observable. There are deep structures that cannot be observed and what can be observed may offer a false picture of those phenomena/structures and their effects (for an excellent exposition of this position see Smith, in Hollis and Smith 1990: 205–8). But, as Smith puts it, although we cannot observe those structures, 'positing their existence gives us the best explanation of social action. To use a phrase familiar to the philosophy of science, we are involved in "inference to the best explanation" (Hollis and Smith 1990: 207). As such, to a realist there is often a dichotomy between reality and appearance. This is a very important issue because it has clear methodological implications. It means that realists do not accept that what appears to be so, or, perhaps

more significantly, what actors say is so, is necessarily so. As an example, classical Marxism, and Marxism is the archetypal classical realism, argued that there was a difference between 'real' interests, which reflect material reality, and perceived interests, which might be manipulated by the powerful forces in society. Given this view, we cannot just ask people what their interests are, because we would merely be identifying their manipulated interests, not their 'real' interests.

The criticisms of classical realism were of two sorts, which reflect different epistemological positions. The positivists denied the existence of unobservable structures. More importantly, they argued that positing them makes the knowledge claims of realism untestable and, thus, unfalsifiable. As such, realist claims that rely on the effect of unobservable structures have the same status to positivists as the claims of scholars from within the interpretist tradition. In contrast, authors from the interpretist tradition criticise the foundational claims of realism. In their view, there are no structures that are independent of social action and no 'objective' basis on which to observe the actions or infer the deep structures. So, the realist claim that structures cause social action are rejected on ontological and epistemological grounds.

In our view, contemporary realism has been significantly influenced by the interpretist critique. In particular, this modern critical realism acknowledges two points. First, while social phenomena exist independently of our interpretation of them, our interpretation/understanding of them affects outcomes. So, structures do not determine; rather they constrain and facilitate. Social science involves the study of reflexive agents who interpret and change structures. Second, our knowledge of the world is fallible; it is theory-laden. We need to identify and understand both the external 'reality' and the social construction of that 'reality' if we are to explain the relationships between social phenomena.

Realism also has clear methodological implications. It suggests that there is a real world 'out there', but emphasises that outcomes are shaped by the way in which that world is socially constructed. As such, it would acknowledge the utility of both quantitative and qualitative data. So, for example, realists might use quantitative methods to identify the extent to which financial markets are 'globalised'. However, they would also want to analyse qualitatively how globalisation is perceived, or discursively constructed, by governments, because the realist argument would be that both the 'reality' and the discursive construction affect what government does in response to global pressures. We shall return to this example later.

Modern realism then attempts to acknowledge much of the interpretist critique, while retaining a commitment to causal explanation. The key

problem here of course is that it is not easy, indeed many would see it as impossible, to combine scientific and interpretist positions because they have such fundamentally different ontological and epistemological under-pinnings, one focusing on explanation and the other on understanding (on this point, see Hollis and Smith 1990: 212).

One of the main criticisms of realists has been that they often treat concepts as if they related to some fixed, or at least more or less given, 'essences' or cores. It should be noted first that this is not a necessary tenet for realists; it reflects rather the philosophical traditions from which they derive. Nevertheless, the question of what a concept is for is an important one, and it affects ontology directly. If a concept cannot be tied firmly to an underlying reality, as traditional philosophy seems to imply, the concept of 'being' itself may be detached from the real world of experience. This is one of the reasons why modern philosophy has considerable difficulty even recognising that there may be a subject of ontology. It should also be noted that this is one of those issues on which positivists and interpretists can find themselves temporarily in agreement, even though, as we have seen, they have fundamentally different views about knowledge and being. Any apparent agreement between them, however, has limited scope, as they have different origins and are heading for different destinations. Having considered how these categories relate to some important issues in the social sciences, we can now move on to apply the arguments to particular cases so as to illustrate their use and their limits.

Ontology and epistemology in political science: two cases

The aim in this section is to examine how a researcher's ontological and epistemological position affects the way they approach empirical questions in political science. We shall focus on two areas: globalisation and multilevel governance. These areas have been chosen because they reflect a broad spread of the concerns, but, in our view, similar arguments could be made in relation to other substantive areas.

Case 1: Globalisation

The literature on globalisation mushroomed in the 1990s. It has been common to distinguish between processes or aspects of globalisation: so many authors have distinguished between economic, political and cultural processes, while acknowledging that they are interrelated. In this vein, many have argued that economic globalisation has grown apace and that this process has significantly restricted the autonomy of the nation state.

Indeed, Ohmae (1990) goes as far as to argue that only two economic forces, global financial markets and transnational corporations, will play any role in the politics of the future. In his view, the future role of states will be analogous to the current role of local councils. At the same time, other authors have focused on cultural globalisation, suggesting that world culture is becoming increasingly homogeneous: in the view of most, reflecting a growing US hegemony. Certainly, there is little doubt that the issue of globalisation in a crucial one for those interested in questions of contemporary political economy and governance.

Political scientists have probably been most concerned with economic globalisation and the way in which it restricts the autonomy of the state, and have utilised a foundationalist ontology and a positivist epistemology, although, as we shall see below, some more recent work is realist. In contrast, sociologists, particularly those who focus on cultural studies, concentrate upon cultural globalisation, operating from an anti-founda-tionalist and interpretist position.

The main debate about economic globalisation has concerned the extent to which it has increased. There are two main positions. Some authors, like Ohmae (1990), who are christened hyperglobalists by Held *et al.* (1999) and seen as first-wave theorists by Hay and Marsh (2000), argue that there has been a massive increase in various indicators of economic globalisa-tion: direct foreign investment; international bank lending; transnational production; international trade and so on. In contrast, authors such as Hirst and Thompson (1999), christened sceptics by Held *et al.* (1999) and seen by Hay and Marsh (2000) as second-wave theorists, argue that the process is more limited. More specifically, they suggest that: globalisation is not a new phenomenon; regionalisation, rather than globalisation, is a better description of the changes that have occurred; and the only area in which there has been significant globalisation is in relation to financial markets. We are not concerned here with the detail of this argument. Our point is that both sets of authors agree about what constitutes evidence of globalisation and how we can go about studying that evidence. Globalisa-tion is an economic process that can be measured quantitatively, indeed there is large agreement as to the appropriate measures, and which, to the extent that it exists, has an effect on patterns of governance.

More recently, other authors have been, in most cases implicitly rather than explicitly, critical of this ontological and epistemological approach. The point is easily made if we return to two ways of classifying the literature on globalisation to which we have already referred. Held *et al.* (1999) contrast hyperglobalist and sceptical approaches to globalisation with a third approach to which they adhere: the transformationalist thesis. In contrast, Hay and Marsh (2000) identify a third wave of the globalisa-tion literature that builds upon a critique of the first two waves. These two

'third ways' share something in common, but do differ significantly in a manner that reflects ontological and epistemological debates.

The transformationalists differ significantly from the sceptics in that they share:

> a conviction that, at the dawn of a new millennium, globalisation is a central driving force behind the rapid social, political and economic changes that are reshaping modern societies and world order ... In this respect, globalisation is conceived as a powerful transformative force which is responsible for a massive shake out of societies, economies, institutions of governance and world order. (Held *et al.* 1999: 7)

Held *et al.* also emphasise the major way in which the transformationalist account parts company with both the other two positions (1999: 7):

> The transformationalists make no claims about the future trajectory of globalisation ... Rather [they] emphasise globalisation as a long-term historical process which is inscribed with contradictions and which is significantly shaped by conjunctural factors.

So, they argue that: there are 'real' social, political and economic changes occurring in the world; globalisation is a cause of these changes, a transformative force; but there is no inevitable process of globalisation which, as social scientists, we can identify. This last point is especially important here. The putative development of globalisation is dependent on the actions of agents, whether individuals, companies, institutions or states; as such it is a socially constructed process. It seems clear then that the transformative position is a realist one.

This position has methodological consequences. It points strongly to comparative analysis, because the emphasis is upon how different countries, and indeed different companies and markets, are affected by, and respond to, this process of globalisation in different ways. If globalisation is not an inevitable or universal process, then we need to focus on how it is differently experienced in different contexts.

This point is even clearer if we turn to what Hay and Marsh call the third-wave literature on globalisation. Hay and Marsh (2000: 6) follow Held *et al.* in arguing that we: 'shouldn't make essentialising and reifying assumptions about the effects, consequences, or even the very existence, of globalisation'. Rather, globalisation is a series of contradictory and contingent processes. More specifically, they suggest that, for many authors, especially the hyperglobalists, globalisation is a process without a subject. In contrast, they argue that it is agents who construct globalisation and, as such, the researcher should identify the actors involved and how they perceive and discursively construct globalising tendencies.

However, Hay and Marsh go further to contend that these discursive constructions have significant effects on outcomes. So, they suggest that it is the discursive construction of globalisation that affects government economic policies, rather than the 'real' processes of globalisation. As such, and taking the UK as an example, their argument would run along the following lines:

- While there has been a significant increase in regionalism in patterns of trading and a globalisation of financial markets, there is limited evidence that Britain is locked into a globalised political economy which determines the economic policy which the British Government can adopt.
- However, British governments, and especially the Blair Government, have argued that it is constrained in that way. It suggests that the extent of globalisation is such that the pursuit of neo-liberal policies is inevitable: there is no alternative.
- As such, it is not the 'reality' of globalisation that is shaping British economic policy, but the dominant discursive construction of that reality.

We are not concerned here about the validity or otherwise of this argument. The crucial point for us is that this view clearly marks a break with the positivism that underpins most work on globalisation. To Hay and Marsh, there may be 'real' processes at work, but the way they affect outcomes is mediated by the discursive construction(s) of these processes. This argument has both realist and interpretist elements. There is an appeal to a real world, but the emphasis is on the discursive construction of that world. This position illustrates how realist and interpretist positions interface. In our view, this position is a realist one if it recognises that there is an interactive or dialectical relationship between the 'real' world and the discourses. A realist would acknowledge not only that discourses have real effects, in this case that the dominant discourse of globalisation shapes economic policy, but also that the 'real' processes of globalisation constrain the resonance of different discourses. So, if the dominant discourse is at odds with the 'reality', alternative discourses can appeal to that 'reality deficit'. However, if it is merely the discourses that have the causal power, then, in our view, it is an interpretist position.

There are other approaches to globalisation which are clearly located in an interpretist tradition. As we emphasised above, most of these approaches stress cultural globalisation. Of course, as Held *et al.* point out (1999: 328), the concept of culture has a long and complex history but 'normally refers to the social construction, articulation and reception of meaning'. This definition immediately suggests an anti-foundationalist ontology and, most often, an interpretist epistemology.

It is possible to approach the issue of cultural globalisation utilising a positivist epistemology. So, one could focus empirically on the extent to which certain cultural icons, such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's or Madonna, have become universal, or whether colonialism was associated with a similar global culture. However, the focus of a cultural studies approach to globalisation is much more likely to be on difference. Two points are important here. First, the argument would be that there are various discourses about globalisation, none of which is 'true', although at any time one discourse may be dominant. Second, while one discourse may dominate, it can be, and will always be, resisted: different agents – citizens and researchers – will offer different narrations of globalisation and its effects. In this way, this alternative 'cultural studies' approach reflects an anti-foundationalist and an interpretist position.

Case 2: Multilevel governance

Multilevel governance and intergovernmentalism: realism versus positivism

The term 'multilevel governance' covers a variety of familiar phenomena that are normally located in the areas of regional policy and European integration. Though 'multilevel governance' (MLG) is rapidly acquiring the status of a fashionable mainstream concept, it is not as established as 'globalisation' in the vocabulary of politicians and commentators. Here again, the contemporary debates in large part reflect different ontological and epistemological positions. In this case study, we concentrate not on the different uses of the term, although these can be significant, but rather on the contrast between MLG and its main opponent, which is liberal intergovernmentalism.

A useful definition of MLG is provided by Hunt (1999): '[According to multilevel governance theories] the policy process involves the interaction between a constellation of public and private actors located at the supranational, national and sub-national level.' This interaction is usually understood as non-hierarchical and as lacking a central, predominant authority, and similar usages can be found in Marks *et al.* (1996) and Armstrong and Bulmer (1998). These theorists argue against the view of the EU as an international organisation whose decision-making is based predominantly on national interests determined by member states, a view known as intergovernmentalism.

The intergovernmentalist perspective is closely associated with international lawyers, but an influential political analysis is provided by Andrew Moravscik (1993), who argues that the European policy process can be

understood as a nested game played out both in the domestic politics of member states and in the international arena of the EU's institutions. While the MLG theorists derive their frameworks from institutionalist perspectives (see Chapter 4), arguing that 'institutions matter' in shaping interaction, analysts such as Moravscik generally utilise rational choice perspectives (see Chapter 3 below). Both approaches would claim to be empirically grounded, but the nature of the empirical grounding differs.

Most MLG theorists are realists in epistemological terms, emphasising how the continuity of rules, norms and operating procedures, and sometimes of 'deep, non-observable structures', can, and does, determine the outcomes of decision-making in the long term. As such, their logic is inductive rather than deductive. Overall, MLG is not so much concerned with the debate between neo-federalists and intergovernmentalists as with the consequences of different possible forms of integration for normative issues such as democratic participation, effective government and distributive justice.

In contrast, liberal intergovernmentalists seek to identify the preferences and the parameters of the individual actors (usually member states) and show how, after the event, the outcomes can be understood as the result of rational calculated behaviour. Their logic is therefore deductive: they argue from the general to the particular. Liberal intergovernmentalism is foundationalist in ontological terms and operates with a positivist epistemology. In its treatment of European integration it is clearly unsympathetic to neo-federalism and to supranationalism.

The normative underpinnings of multilevel governance and intergovermentalism

MLG theorists argue that, rather than conceptualising regional policy as a national issue in which the lead role is taken by the national state institutions, it should be identified as an arena in which the European Union plays an integral role in policy-making, together with the separate regional authorities and the central national institutions. In this sense, theories of multilevel governance make a distinction between 'government' and 'governance'. 'Government', it is argued, is too narrowly concerned with the formal structures of state authority, and with the associated processes and issues, whereas 'governance' is concerned with much wider notions of politics, encompassing the production, accumulation and regulation of collective goods at all levels including the international. Power relations in multilevel governance are structured by reciprocal interdependence on each other's resources, rather than on conflict over either scarcity or fundamental values. Typically, these theories argue that relations of decision-making between the various levels should be seen as

loosely interconnected rather than as tightly nested; that is, characterised by multilateral links, and non-hierarchical in form, rather than by a hierarchical chain of bilateral links in which the national state authority has a predominant role, as is the case with intergovernmental approaches.

There is thus a strong normative element in multilevel governance. From describing the increased evidence of the multiplicity of decision-making forms and levels in European integration, proponents move to arguments about the value of multilevel governance in enhancing democratic legitimacy and effective decision-making under conditions of globalised political economy. In comparison with state-centred accounts, multilevel governance is said to be 'closer to the people', and therefore more acceptable, and more flexible and adaptable, so better able to respond to the rapidly changing economic climate (Marks *et al.* 1996).

The arguments against multilevel governance, if it is regarded as a policy prescription as well as empirical analysis, concentrate on two main issues (Moravscik 1993; Scharpf 1988). The first is what is known as the 'joint decision trap'. This focuses upon the danger of deadlock in decision-making where there are many participants, interdependent arenas and a variety of possible combinations of policy-making processes. Though multilevel governance may offer the prospect of policy-making close to the people and greater legitimacy, it risks sacrificing efficiency in decision-making if there is no authoritative procedure for resolving disagreements among equal participants. A second criticism denies even that multilevel governance provides greater legitimacy and argues that, when the smaller units and more local levels of decision-making are included, the greater complexity of procedures results in opacity of decision-making and, therefore, in less accountability. In practice, multilevel governance can mean obscure elite-led agreements and public incomprehension. Neo-liberal arguments try to resolve these problems by emphasising how the member states in the EU remain both the focus of popular legitimacy, albeit with some rebalancing towards regional authorities, and the main guarantors of effective governmental decision-making.

In response to this, Marks *et al.* (1996) have three main criticisms of the intergovernmental approach. Underlying these disagreements is a fundamental dispute about the nature of social reality. First, positivist explanations of societal phenomena neglect the structural constraints within which individuals operate. These are varied in kind, but the most important are generally the impact of differential allocation of resources, the culturally-given nature of the value framework within which individuals choose and the unpredictability of external factors, such as the international economic and security climate.

Second, the realist perspective emphasises how the institutional frameworks have a primary effect in shaping decision-making through their

formal rules, their informal procedures, their value structures and their effect on office-holding and internal role-oriented behaviour. In one sense, the institutions are no more than the sum of countless individual choices, but merely to state this does not get us very far. Realists seek to find ways of characterising different institutional frameworks so as to move beyond this and to introduce other levels of analysis and explanation which recognise the weight of the long-term structural and institutional context.

Third, it is argued that intergovernmentalists are insufficiently critical about what time-frames are relevant and why. The term 'path dependency' used in this context (Pierson 1996) does not just refer to the given nature of resource allocations at 'point zero' which the researcher takes as the start. It also directs our attention to the impact of decisions prior to point zero, and of the ways in which the institutional frameworks lock actors into particular sets of choices. This implicitly asks positivists to justify why they adopt diachronic modes of explanation, which imply social understanding as a set of discrete operations in fixed points in time, as opposed to synchronic explanations, which emphasise a more continuous and context-led understanding of the social nature of time.

Despite these epistemological and methodological differences, writers such as Moravscik and Scharpf (Scharpf 1988, 1997) appear to be able to integrate some of the concerns of multilevel governance into their own perspective, so that, despite the methodological differences between the positivists and realists, we can identify these as distinct strands in the study of the European policy process, marked by an attentiveness to similar policy problems and with some of the same language.

The constructivist approach

This is not true of the social constructivist approach (see, for example, Jørgensen 1998; Weldes 1996; Wendt 1994). This rejects the language of causality, with which positivists and realists are content in their different ways, and in contrast, is based upon an interpretist epistemological position. Constructivists argue that, if there is a problem of increasing complexity of decision-making associated with the decline of the nation state, this complexity must be understood as an intentional social construct on the part of decision-makers, part of a set of political projects associated with responses to perceptions of external and internal constraints. The questions which arise are concerned with political decision-making as a series of attempts to resolve conflicts over meaning and identity, understood in the broadest sense. Constructivists take issue with the positivist understanding of the nature of political choice. They argue against the acceptance of individual preference as a given and instead interrogate specifically why and how preferences come to be formed and

how these preferences and choices relate to the strategic aims of powerful interests in society. Multilevel governance then would not be seen as a set of objectively perceived phenomena, but as a normative framework which is itself part of the political conflict between the interests associated with neo-liberal economic restructuring and those seeking a more social democratic accommodation with technological change.

This locates the arguments about multilevel governance within the discussion about the nature of globalisation, which we dealt with above, and in which one of the main disputes is about the underlying realities of technological economic and social change and their relationship with the discursively constructed political uses made of them within specific political projects.

Conclusion

The point here is not to attempt to resolve these disputes. Rather, what we have sought to do is to show how the different approaches in different issues relate to epistemological and methodological assumptions, and to one another. The terms introduced here can be used as signposts, suggesting how we can come to terms with the deeper implications of the theories and groups of concerns which are the focus of the individual chapters which follow. One of the temptations in so doing is to attempt to find a synthesis of all the available positions, in the hope that, at some level of analysis, agreement is possible over fundamental issues. Unfortunately, experience and logic combine to warn against this temptation. These debates have been part of the intellectual and moral climate of Western thought for centuries and continue because they reflect disagreements not just about logic or technicalities but also about the proper scope of human action in society. In other words, they are questions which relate to deep-rooted moral positions that may be internally coherent, but are incompatible with one another, except in so far as they all include some appeal to intellectual and ethical tolerance of diversity. In the face of these difficulties, another strategy, alluring at least to risk-averse researchers, is to avoid the issue. Far from being safe, this position is actually rather unsafe, since it does not enable one to distinguish between good and bad research and between good and bad arguments. The least one can say about these issues is that they are of sufficient importance to warrant a genuine commitment to coming to terms with them. Coming to terms with the issues requires one to think through the different arguments separately, to compare them and to evaluate them. As we argued at the beginning of this chapter, this means identifying, as far as possible, what are the epistemological and ontological underpinnings and what these imply in

terms of argumentation, practical research method, explanatory logic and research construction. The purpose of this chapter has been to encourage this and to attempt to provide an introduction to some of the main ideas and methods involved.

Further reading

- The best introductions to the philosophy of science and social science are Chalmers (1985, 1990) and Winch (1958).
- For an accessible overview of ontology and epistemology, see Hay (2002).
- On the positivist approach, see Kuhn (1970), Hempel (1965, 1966) or Halfpenny (1982).
- On the interpretive approach, see Bevir and Rhodes (1999).
- On realism, see Sayer (1992).

Part I

Approaches

Chapter 2

Behaviouralism

DAVID SANDERS

The behavioural approach to social and political analysis concentrates on a single, deceptively simple, question: why do people behave in the way they do? What differentiates behaviouralists from other social scientists is their insistence that: (a) *observable* behaviour, whether it is at the level of the individual or the social aggregate, should be the focus of analysis; and (b) any explanation of that behaviour should be susceptible to empirical testing.

Scholars working in the behavioural tradition have investigated a wide range of substantive problems. Behaviouralists have extensively analysed the reasons that underlie the main form of mass political participation in democratic countries: voting (for example, Heath *et al.* 1994). They have also examined the origins of participation in other, more unconventional, forms of political activity such as demonstrations, strikes and even riots (for example, Barnes and Kaase 1979; Parry *et al.* 1992). At the elite level, behaviouralists have analysed leadership behaviour, placing particular emphasis on the connections between the way in which leaders view the world (their attitudes and values) and the particular actions that they take (for example, Allison 1971; King 1985; Sanders 1990; Dunleavy *et al.* 1993). In terms of social aggregates, behavioural analysis has examined the actions of interest groups (for example, Grant and Marsh 1977; Wilson 1990) and political parties (for example, Budge and Fairlie 1983; Budge and Laver 1992). At the international level, behavioural analysis has also focused on the actions of nation states (for example, Rosenau 1969), as well as on the behaviour of non-state actors such as multinational corporations, international terrorist groups and supranational organisations like the EU (for example, Keohane 1984; Baldwin 1993). In all these diverse contexts, the central questions that behaviouralists seek to answer are simple: what do the actors involved actually do and how can we best explain why they do it? These are obviously not the only questions that can be asked about individual and social actors. Behaviouralists simply believe that they are the most important ones.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief outline of the origins of behaviouralism and summarises the core analytic assertions that underpin it. The second section reviews the main criticisms that, with varying degrees of justification, have been levelled at the behavioural approach. The third part describes one major study – Whiteley and Seyd's analysis of political activism – which illustrates some of the more positive features of behavioural analysis. The final section considers the influence that behaviouralism continues to exert on contemporary political researchers.

The rise of the behavioural movement and its core characteristics

The behavioural movement assumed an important position in the social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s. Its philosophical origins were in the writings of Auguste Comte (Comte 1974) in the nineteenth century and in the logical positivism of the 'Vienna Circle' in the 1920s. Positivism, which was popularised in Britain by Alfred Ayer and in Germany by Carl Hempel, asserted that analytic statements made about the physical or social world fell into one of three categories. First, such statements could be useful tautologies: they could be purely definitional statements that assigned a specific meaning to a particular phenomenon or concept. For example, we might define families living on less than one-third of the average weekly wage as 'living below the poverty line'. Second, statements could be empirical, that is to say, they could be tested against observation in order to see if they were true or false. Third, statements that fell into neither of the first two categories were devoid of analytic meaning. For the positivists, in short, meaningful analysis could proceed only on the basis of useful tautologies and empirical statements: metaphysics, theology, aesthetics and even ethics merely introduced meaningless obfuscation into the process of inquiry.

It would not be correct, of course, to assume that behaviouralism accepted all the philosophical precepts of positivism. Even as behaviouralism was gaining increasingly wide acceptance among social scientists in the 1950s, positivism itself was being subjected to ferocious philosophical criticism – not least on the grounds that it was unclear whether positivism's assertion that there were only three types of statement was itself tautological, empirical or meaningless. This said, behaviouralism's view of the nature of empirical theory and of explanation was strongly influenced by the positivist tradition. Although there are many definitions of these

two critical terms, most behaviouralists would probably accept something along the lines of the following:

- An *empirical theory* is a set of interconnected abstract statements, consisting of assumptions, definitions and empirically testable hypotheses, which purports to describe and explain the occurrence of a given phenomenon or set of phenomena.
- An *explanation* is a causal account of the occurrence of some phenomenon or set of phenomena. An explanation of a particular (class of) event(s) consists in the specification of the minimum non-tautological set of antecedent necessary and sufficient conditions required for its (their) occurrence.

The importance of these definitions of theory and explanation lies in the implications that they have for theory evaluation. For positivists, the crucial question that should always be asked about any purportedly explanatory theory is: 'How would we know if this theory were incorrect?' Behaviouralism's endorsement of the central importance of this question is precisely what demonstrates its intellectual debt to positivism. For both positivists and behaviouralists there are three main ways in which explanatory theories can be evaluated:

1. A 'good' theory must be internally consistent: it must not make statements such that both the presence and the absence of a given set of antecedent conditions are deemed to 'cause' the occurrence of the phenomenon that is purportedly being explained.
2. A 'good' theory relating to a specific class of phenomena should, as far as possible, be consistent with other theories that seek to explain related phenomena.
3. And crucially, genuinely explanatory theories must be capable of generating empirical predictions that can be tested against observation. The only meaningful way of deciding between competing theories (which might appear to be equally plausible in other respects) is by empirical testing. This testing can be conducted either at the level of the individual social actor or at the level of the social aggregate – whichever is appropriate given the nature of the theory that is being tested.

It is this emphasis on empirical observation and testing that produces the two characteristic features of the behavioural approach to social inquiry.

The first – and least contentious – of these is behaviouralism's commitment to the systematic use of all the relevant empirical evidence rather than a limited set of illustrative supporting examples. This

commitment simply means that, when a particular theoretical statement is being investigated, researchers must not limit themselves to a consideration of only those observed cases that provide 'anecdotal' support for the theoretical claims that are being made. Rather, the researcher must consider all the cases – or at least a representative sample of them – that are encompassed by the theoretical statement that is being evaluated.

It is in this context that the use and development of statistical techniques are justified by behaviouralists – as a vehicle for analysing large amounts of 'relevant empirical evidence'. It should be emphasised in the strongest possible terms, however, that behaviouralism is not synonymous either with quantification or with the downgrading of qualitative research. Certainly, behavioural researchers have frequently used quantitative techniques as heuristic devices for handling evidence. There is nothing intrinsic in behaviouralism's epistemological position, however, that requires quantification. On the contrary, quantitative and qualitative forms of empirical analysis are equally acceptable to behavioural researchers. What matters for them is not whether evidence is qualitative or quantitative but (a) that it is used to evaluate theoretical propositions, and (b) that it is employed systematically rather than illustratively.

The second characteristic feature of behavioural analysis is slightly more subtle in its implications – but no less important. It is simply that scientific theories and/or explanations must, in principle, be capable of being falsified. Note here that the reference is to 'scientific' rather than simply to 'empirical' or 'explanatory' theories. This usage reflects behaviouralism's commitment to Karl Popper's revision of traditional positivism in which he (a) substituted the principle of falsifiability for that of verification, and (b) simultaneously identified the falsifiability criterion as the line of demarcation between 'scientific' and 'pseudo-scientific' enquiry (Popper 1959).

In order fully to appreciate the import of this statement, a brief digression is necessary. We need to consider precisely what is meant by a theory or an explanation being 'falsifiable'. Consider the familiar statement that Popper himself used as an example: 'All swans are white'. Suppose that we observe a black swan. What does this tell us about the statement? One interpretation is that observing the black swan shows the statement to be empirically false: the statement was in principle *capable* of being falsified and it has been falsified. But there is another way of interpreting the statement in the light of a black swan being observed. The statement says that all swans are white. It follows that the black swan that we have observed cannot be a swan because it is not white: the statement, therefore, is not false.

Can both of these interpretations be correct? The answer is that they can. Each interpretation makes a different set of assumptions about the

definition of a swan. The first assumes that a swan is a large bird with a long neck that looks very pretty when it paddles through water; it says nothing of the bird's colour. In these circumstances, the definitions of 'swan' and 'colour' are *independent*: there is no overlap between them. In other words, it *is possible* to observe something that has all the characteristics of a swan regardless of its colour. We have observed a black swan and, therefore, the initial statement must have been false. The second interpretation assumes that a swan is a large bird with a long neck that looks very pretty when it paddles through water *and that it is also white.* In other words, this second interpretation assumes that whiteness is part of the *definition* of being a swan. In these circumstances, when a black 'swan' is observed it cannot be a swan, because part of the definition of being a swan is that it is white.

What is clear from this discussion is that the status of the statement depends upon whether or not its constituent terms are independently defined. With the first interpretation, the terms 'swan' and 'white' *are* independently defined. As a result, the statement is an empirical or falsifiable one: it is possible to test it against the world of observation. With the second interpretation, however, the terms 'swan' and 'white' are not independently defined. As a result, the statement is (partially) tautological: it is simply an untestable assertion that one of the defining features of a swan is that it is white.

This problem of interpretation is common in the social sciences. Consider the following statement: 'In general elections people vote against the incumbent government if they are dissatisfied with its performance.' Without further information, we cannot tell whether this is a testable empirical statement or merely a definitional tautology. The statement can, in fact, be interpreted in two completely different ways. First, we can interpret the statement in purely tautological terms. Looking at a particular election, we could say: (a) that every voter who voted for the government must have been satisfied with its performance (otherwise they would not have voted for it); and (b) that every voter who did not vote for the government could not have been satisfied with its performance (otherwise they would have voted for it). With this interpretation, we can always 'believe' in the statement but we have not *demonstrated* that it is empirically correct; we have treated it purely as a tautology. The second interpretation is to regard the statement as an empirical one – but this is possible only if we provide a definition of dissatisfaction with the government that is independent of the act of voting. If we were to devise some independent way of measuring dissatisfaction, then we would obviously be able to test our initial statement against any available empirical evidence. We might find that all those who voted for the government were satisfied with its performance and that all those who

voted against it were dissatisfied – in which case we would have corroborated the statement. Crucially, however, by providing independent definitions of 'voting' and of 'dissatisfaction' we create the possibility that the statement might be empirically incorrect: we render the statement *falsifiable* – even though we might hope that it will not be falsified.

Having distinguished between falsifiable and non-falsifiable statements, Popper goes on to suggest that theories can only be regarded as 'scientific' if they generate empirical predictions that are capable of being falsified. Theories that do not generate such predictions are merely sophisticated tautologies that explain nothing – no matter how elegant and elaborate they might appear. Many behaviouralists are unconcerned as to whether or not their research should be described as 'scientific'. Crucially, however, they are unequivocally committed to the principle of falsifiability. Behaviouralists do not deny that there are other ways of evaluating the adequacy of a particular theory. They none the less insist that a genuinely explanatory theory must engender falsifiable propositions of the form 'If A, then B; if not A, then not B'; and it must specify causal antecedents that are defined independently of the phenomenon that is supposedly being explained.

All this is not to suggest, however, that behaviouralists believe that all aspects of their theories must be capable of being falsified. As Lakatos (1971) has argued, most theories in the physical and social sciences contain a non-falsifiable set of 'core' propositions. These core propositions often take the form of highly abstract assumptions that are not susceptible to empirical testing. The non-falsifiability of the 'core' propositions, however, does not necessarily mean that the theory itself is non-falsifiable. Provided that a series of testable predictions, which can be examined in the light of empirical observation, can be derived logically from the 'core', then the theory as a whole can be regarded as falsifiable. It does represent something more than sophisticated tautology; it does provide the analyst with an opportunity to specify the conditions under which they would know that the theory was 'incorrect'.

Behaviouralists, then, emphasise the twin notions that theories should: (a) seek to explain something; and (b) be capable, in principle, of being tested against the world of observation. For behaviouralists, non-falsifiable theories are not really theories at all. They are merely elaborate fantasies – of varying degrees of complexity – that scholars can choose to believe or disbelieve as they wish. For behaviouralists, theory evaluation must proceed beyond merely examining a theory in order to assess its internal consistency and the nature of the 'puzzles' that it seems to resolve: theory evaluation must also involve subjecting theoretical propositions to empirical test.

Criticisms of the behavioural approach

As with any other general approach in the social sciences, behaviouralism has been the target of a number of important criticisms. These criticisms can be grouped under three broad headings and each will be examined in turn below.

Objections to the positivist claim that statements which are neither definitions (useful tautologies) nor empirical are meaningless

It was noted earlier that behaviouralism has its philosophical roots in positivism. It would appear to follow that any weaknesses inherent in positivism must also therefore be inherent in behaviouralism. Among the many criticisms that have been levelled at positivism, perhaps the most important is the simple proposition that the large class of statements that positivism labels as 'meaningless' in fact contains many ideas that can add very significantly to our understanding of social behaviour and the human condition. In strict positivist terms, there can be no role for normative theory for the investigation of what ought to be – because normative discourses are not restricted to definitional and empirical statements. Similarly, there can be no role for aesthetic or moral arguments, for the same reason. And there can be no role for the sort of hermeneutic analysis that seeks to understand social behaviour through deep reflection about the nature of human perceptions, thought processes and motivations. If positivism seeks to exclude these forms of reflection, the argument runs, it must be in error.

The extent to which positivists genuinely ever did deny the value of non-empirical analysis need not concern us here. It is important to point out, however, that most contemporary researchers who continue to work in the behaviouralist tradition would almost certainly reject the notion that there can be no role for normative theory, aesthetics or hermeneutics in political and social analysis. They would argue, instead, that these approaches yield a different form of knowledge or understanding – not that they are meaningless. In essence, modem behaviouralists acknowledge freely this particular criticism of positivism. They deflect it from themselves by recognising that other, potentially useful, forms of knowledge can be acquired by scholars working in other intellectual traditions. Modem behaviouralists – 'post-behaviouralists' – simply prefer to subject their own-theoretical claims to empirical test. They also suspect that scholars working in non-empirical traditions are never able to provide a satisfactory answer to the crucial question: 'How would you know if you were wrong?'

The tendency towards mindless empiricism

One of the claims of the early positivists was that theoretical understanding could be obtained only through a process of enquiry that began with theory-free observation of 'all the facts up to now' and which then derived law-like generalisations inductively from the empirical regularities that were observed. Later positivists, notably Hempel and Popper, strongly rejected this 'narrow inductivist' view of the nature of scientific enquiry, arguing that enquiry could only proceed if the researcher's efforts to observe 'relevant facts' were guided either by clear theoretical expectations or, at a minimum, by some kind of explanatory 'hunch'. Hempel (1966: 11–12) is worth quoting at length in this context:

> [A narrow inductivist investigation] ... could never get off the ground. Even its first [fact gathering] phase could never be carried out, for a collection of all the facts would have to await the end of the world, so to speak; and even all the facts up to now cannot be collected since there are an infinite number and variety of them. Are we to examine for example, all the grains of sand in all the deserts and on all the beaches, and are we to record their shapes, their weights, their chemical composition, their distances from each other, their constantly changing temperature, and their equally changing distance from the centre of the moon? Are we to record the floating thoughts that cross our minds in the tedious process? The shapes of the clouds overhead, the changing color of the sky? The construction and the trade name of our writing equipment? Our own life histories and those of our fellow investigators? All these, and untold other things, are, after all, among 'all the facts up to now'.

In spite of positivism's moves away from inductivism, there can be no doubt that, between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s, a number of scholars working within the behavioural tradition did still appear to be committed to an inductivist approach to research. It would be unnecessarily invidious to isolate particular examples of this tendency. It is none the less fair to say that, during this period, many behaviouralists acted as if law-like scientific generalisations could be constructed purely by identifying the statistical regularities evident in large quantities of empirical data. This emphasis on data and the concomitant downgrading of *a priori* theoretical reasoning in turn produced two undesirable tendencies in behavioural research.

The first of these was a tendency to emphasise what can be easily measured rather than what might be theoretically important. This sort of criticism is always easy to make, in the sense that one person's triviality

may be another's profundity. Nonetheless, the tendency to play down the potential importance of phenomena that are intrinsically difficult to measure has always been a matter of concern to both critics and advocates of behavioural research. This has been especially true in relation to the analysis of electoral behaviour. Since the explosion of behavioural research in the 1950s, voting studies have concentrated primarily on electors' social profiles, partisan identifications, ideological positions, policy preferences and economic perceptions. Complex models have been devised – and tested empirically – which show the relative importance, and causal ordering, of different aspects of these various phenomena in the determination of the vote. (See, for example, Sarlvik and Crewe 1983; Heath *et al.* 1985; Heath 1991).

Yet, despite the considerable contribution that behavioural analysis has made to our understanding of a voter's decision calculus, it has often been argued that, somehow, an important part of what it means to vote – as well as part of the calculus itself – may have been omitted from behavioural analyses. There has perhaps been insufficient attention paid to inconsistencies and contradictions in voters' political perceptions and to the possibility not only that many voters change their political preferences frequently, but also that their preferences vary, quite genuinely, with the social context in which they are expressed. There are other areas – relating to the way in which individuals reflect, to a greater or lesser degree, upon themselves – where behavioural electoral research has simply not dared to tread. What sort of person do I think I am? What aspirations and expectations do I have about my future life? What sort of life do I think I am capable of leading or should lead? How do I relate my notions of personal morality to the moral stances of the major political parties? The answers to questions such as these may have no bearing on the way in which political preferences are formed and transformed. Within the behavioural frame of reference, however, it is very hard to envisage how the responses to such questions – given the difficulty of measuring those responses systematically – could ever be incorporated into formal analysis. As a result, they are largely excluded from the analytic frame.

A second, and related, undesirable feature of behavioural research that arises from its overly empirical focus has been a tendency to concentrate on readily observed phenomena – such as voting – rather than the more subtle, and perhaps deeper, structural forces that promote stability and change in social and political systems. One obvious concept that has been neglected by behavioural research in this context is that of *interests*. The notion of interests has played an important part in a wide variety of social and political theories ranging from Marx, Max Weber and Vilfredo Pareto in the domestic field to Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr in the field of international relations. In all these contexts, social actors – whether they

are individuals, groups of individuals or even nation states – are seen as pursuing strategies that are aimed at maximising their 'interests'. Yet, as scholars working in the behavioural tradition have found repeatedly, it is extraordinarily difficult to observe the 'interests' of a particular individual, group or state directly. In consequence, behavioural research has tended to shy away from the theoretical and empirical analysis of interests – preferring to leave the field clear for scholars working in other, non-empirical, traditions.

The assumed independence of theory and observation

The early behaviouralists proclaimed their approach to social inquiry as being both 'scientific' and 'value-free'. They claimed not to be seeking to justify any particular ethical or political stance. Rather, they sought simply to uncover 'the facts' through impartial observation and to offer politically-neutral theories that would explain them in the most parsimonious way. As the passage from Hempel quoted earlier shows, the degree of inductivism thus implied – in which 'explanatory theory' emerges only after all the relevant facts have been surveyed impartially – was always impossible. Some sort of initial theoretical understanding is necessary before the researcher can decide what it is that should be observed.

Modern behaviouralists, along with researchers working in other intellectual traditions, roundly reject the notion that theory and observation are independent. On the contrary, most post-behaviouralists would now accept the relativist view that what is observed is in part a consequence of the theoretical position that the analyst adopts in the first place.

Modern behaviouralists, however, are distinguishable from most relativists. It is one thing to allow that observations are coloured by theory; it is quite another to conclude that this means that one set of theories and observations is as good as another. For modern behaviouralists, the ultimate test of a good theory is still whether or not it is consistent with observation – with the available empirical evidence. Modern behaviouralists are perfectly prepared to accept that different theoretical positions are likely to elicit different descriptions of 'reality' – that they are likely to produce different 'observations'. They insist, however, that whatever 'observations' are implied by a particular theoretical perspective, those observations must be used in order to conduct a systematic empirical test of the theory that is being posited.

Finally, it is worth noting that behaviouralists are sometimes criticised – with some justification – for failing to comprehend the 'big picture' of social and political transformation. That is to say, by emphasising the

description and explanation of observable individual and group behaviour, behaviouralists underestimate the importance of 'more profound' social and political changes that might be taking place. For example, theorists who debate the ways in which 'the state' evolves under conditions of advanced capitalism (for example, Adorno 1976; Habermas 1976; Jessop 1990) tend to deride behavioural analysis as being concerned merely with superficialities and with failing to offer a theory (or explanation) of significant social or political change. Behaviouralists respond by pointing out that broad-ranging social theories which purport to analyse significant social change must be based on some sort of empirical observation. If a writer wishes to argue, for example, that 'the capitalist state' is in 'crisis', then they must be able to specify what the observable referents of the crisis actually are. If there is a 'crisis', (some) people must be taking certain sorts of action or must be thinking certain things that enable the analyst to 'know' that a 'crisis' exists. Similarly, if some new form of social relationship is emerging (perhaps as a result of new patterns of economic production) then that new form of relationship must have some empirical referent or referents, otherwise how can the analyst 'know' that the new form is indeed occurring? Behaviouralists are entirely prepared to recognise that broad-ranging social and political theories are both possible and desirable. They merely insist that, if such theories are to be credible, they cannot be couched indefinitely at so high a level of abstraction as to render them incapable of being tested empirically. For behaviouralists, social and political theories are supposed to describe and explain that which can be observed – whether it involves stasis or change. Theories of social change only start to be interesting to behaviouralists when they: (a) specify the empirical referents that are used in order to make the judgement that profound change is indeed taking place; and (b) provide the empirical evidence which shows that these referents are indeed changing in the specified direction. Behaviouralism is entirely neutral as to what the 'referents' in any theory should be – this is the domain of the social theorist. To behaviouralists, however, a social 'theory' without clear empirical referents is nothing more than mere assertion.

The strengths of the behavioural approach: an example

While it is clear from the foregoing discussion that the behavioural approach can be subjected to serious criticism, it would be very wrong to infer that all examples of behavioural research are flawed. On the contrary, behavioural research at its best can make a considerable theoretical and empirical contribution to the understanding and explanation of social behaviour.

The strengths of the behavioural approach derive primarily from its advocates' determination to pursue forms of analysis that are *capable of replication*. Scholars working in the behavioural tradition are always concerned to establish that other researchers who make similar sets of assumptions as them and examine the same evidence would draw broadly similar conclusions. This need to ensure that research findings are capable of replication necessarily means that behaviouralists are obliged to be very clear in their specification of: (a) what it is that they are trying to explain; (b) the precise theoretical explanation that is being advanced; and (c) the way in which they are using empirical evidence in order to evaluate that theoretical explanation. The need for clarity of exposition in turn means that behaviouralists rarely enter into that most sterile area of academic debate: 'What did writer X mean when they argued Y?' For behavioural-ists, unless X makes it clear what he or she means in the first place, then X's work is clearly not capable of being replicated and argument Y is therefore likely to be treated with suspicion in any case.

The strengths of 'good' behavioural analysis can be illustrated by reference to Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd's analysis of party activism in the UK (Whiteley and Seyd 1998). Their analysis involves a careful combination of rigorous theorising and systematic empirical testing. It offers both a methodological advance in the way that political activism can be studied and a substantive account of the changes in patterns of party activism that were occurring in Britain in the early to mid-1990s.

Whiteley and Seyd focus on a question that has intrigued both politicians and political observers for many years: why do some people get very actively involved in grass-roots party politics? Even top politicians complain about how difficult it is for them to make a difference to anything. It is something of a mystery why thousands of party activists are prepared to give up large amounts of time delivering leaflets and knocking on doors in order to persuade voters to support their party. Whiteley and Seyd's analysis begins with a discussion of the rational actor model (see Chapter 3 in this book for a discussion of rational choice theory). One obvious explanation for people getting involved in politics is that they derive benefits from it. Rational people will presumably be active only to the extent that they think the benefits of activism outweigh the costs. Although this simple rational calculus is at the core of Whiteley and Seyd's model, they also accept that rational choice explanations, on their own, are insufficient to explain complex human behaviour. They accord-ingly develop what they describe as a 'general incentives model' which recognises that rational cost–benefit explanations need to be supplemented by non-rational factors such as ideology, identity and the political context in which the individual activist is located.

The rational actor part of the general incentives model has three components: individual benefits, collective benefits, and individual costs. *Individual benefits* are the most easily understood. They include incentives associated with both the 'process' and the 'outcome' of activism. Being active involves doing things (such as meeting like-minded people) that, for some activists, are intrinsically interesting. There is accordingly a 'process incentive' that underpins activism. 'Outcome incentives' are associated with the idea that grass-roots activism increases the likelihood that the activist can develop a serious political career – either as a local councillor or even as an MP or minister. The *collective benefits* of activism are a little more subtle. They consist in being active on behalf of a party because that party will seek to advance policy positions of which the activist approves – positions that would be almost impossible for the individual to advance on their own. The more that an individual agrees with the key policy positions advocated by their party, the higher the collective benefits of activism; and therefore the more active they are likely to be. Finally, set against these incentives, are the *costs* of activism. These involve both the physical and mental effort of campaigning on behalf of a party and the opportunity costs – in terms of family life, for example – of activism. The simple prediction that the model makes is that individuals will be active to the extent that the two sets of benefits exceed the costs.

This simple prediction, however, is modified in several important ways. The first modification is concerned with *political efficacy*. Even if individuals believe that the benefits of their activism substantially out-weigh the costs, they are unlikely to participate if they believe that their activity will not actually affect anything important. This implies, for Whiteley and Seyd, that any cost–benefit analysis of activism needs to control for political efficacy. Their model accordingly takes account of both 'personal efficacy' (the individual's sense that their behaviour can change political outcomes) and 'party efficacy' (the individual's sense that their party can change Britain). A second modification to the simple cost–benefit calculus focuses on the idea of *emotional or affective attachment* to a party. It is likely that some people are active in party politics because their 'identification' with a particular party forms part of their definition of themselves. For such people, rational cost–benefit calculation about party activism is unimportant. Activism is an expressive activity that allows them to assert their identity. Whiteley and Seyd accordingly argue that the stronger an individual's identification with a party, the more active they will be on the party's behalf. A third modification relates to *ideology*. Here, Whiteley and Seyd argue that activism tends to be associated with more intensely-held ideological convictions. Other things being equal, strong ideologues (of either left or right) will be more

committed to the party cause than their weaker counterparts and, as a result, will be likely to display relatively high levels of activism. Whiteley and Seyd's final modification to the simple rational actor model concerns *the political context in which activism takes place*. They argue that victory in the last local or national election, because it raises local activists' morale, acts as an incentive to further activism now; defeat, for the opposite reason, acts as a disincentive. Their model accordingly controls for whether or not the activist lives in a local authority area or constituency won by their party in the previous local and national elections.

Having argued that these various factors can in principle affect activism, Whiteley and Seyd seek to specify a formal model that allows the relative importance of each of them to be assessed. They opt for a simple *linear additive model* that expresses activism as a 'function' of a number of different explanatory or 'independent' variables as follows:

Equation 1:

$$\text{Activism} = a + b1\,\text{Personal Benefits} + b2\,\text{Collective Benefits} - b3\,\text{Costs}$$
$$+ b4\,\text{Personal Efficacy} + b5\,\text{Party Efficacy}$$
$$+ b6\,\text{Party Identification} + b7\,\text{Ideological Strength}$$
$$+ b8\,\text{Party won constituency in last election}$$
$$+ b9\,\text{Party won local authority in last election}$$

where a is a 'constant' included for statistical reasons and $b1$–$b9$ are coefficients which measure the relative importance of each explanatory variable.

As good behaviouralists, Whiteley and Seyd are not content simply to assert that their model 'explains' the behaviour of party activists in Britain. Having specified their model, their next step is to try to find ways of *testing* it empirically. This requires them to have data that are derived from real individuals which measure those individuals' levels of activism as well as the benefits, costs and other characteristics summarised in the equation above. In gathering these data, Whiteley and Seyd had several choices. First, they could have gone round to their local Labour and Conservative clubs and asked a few activists, perhaps over a beer, to reflect on why they bothered to campaign on behalf of their respective parties. This might have told them a lot about these particular individuals *but it would not have provided them with systematic, representative evidence about party activists in the UK in general*. Second, they could have organised in-depth interviews with, say, 100 activists from each of the major parties and recorded their responses in great detail. This 'qualitative' approach would also have told them a lot about the particular individuals concerned. But,

in addition to being extremely expensive in terms of research time, it would again have failed to provide the researchers with evidence that could be reliably regarded as *representative* of party activists generally. A third approach might have been to interview a representative sample of British voters and then to compare the small number of activists with the vast majority of non-activists. The problem with this approach is that the proportion of activists who are picked up by these general surveys are generally so few in number that they, again, cannot be regarded as a representative sample of activists.

The fourth approach, and this is the one that Whiteley and Seyd in fact adopt, is to conduct an explicit survey of party activists. The key idea in their research design is that activists vary in their activism in two ways: some are more active than others; and any given activist may vary in their degree of activism over time. Whiteley and Seyd accordingly conducted a large-scale representative survey of both Labour and Conservative Party members in the early 1990s, before the 1992 general election. This enabled them to map out the ways in which levels of activism in both parties varied across individual members. They then went back to the same party members (2,935 Labour supporters and 1,604 Conservatives) some two years later, after the general election. On each occasion, they administered the same battery of questions that sought to measure each of the concepts shown in the equation. This allowed Whiteley and Seyd to assess how much each individual changed in terms of his or her activism level and to assess if these changes were related to the independent variables.

Before Whiteley and Seyd can test their theoretical ideas, however, they are obliged to *operationalise* the model shown in the equation. Operationalisation is the process of translating an abstract theory or formal equation into a form that can be tested empirically. It is necessary for the obvious reason that theories are typically couched in an abstract language (activism, collective benefits and so on) that does not always correspond directly to the world of observation. For each concept that the model defines, a set of empirical referents or *indicators* is required. Each of these indicators needs to be measured clearly and unambiguously so that every individual analysed can be assigned a comparable 'score' for each concept. For example, in this case, Whiteley and Seyd need to obtain an 'activism' score for individual respondents in their survey. The specific indicators that Whiteley and Seyd use to measure each of the concepts in the equation are shown in Table 2.1 below. An important part of their theoretical analysis – which cannot be reviewed here because of its length – consists in providing a set of arguments that link each concept to its operational indicators. However, since the concepts themselves cannot be directly measured, there is no formal, empirical way of assessing the adequacy of these arguments. Other scholars simply have to make their

Table 2.1 *Theoretical concepts and the empirical indicators employed to measure them in Whiteley and Seyd's analysis of party activism*

Concept	Indicator/Operational Measure(s)
Activism	• Displayed election poster • Signed petition supported by the party • Donated money to party funds • Delivered party leaflets • Attended a party meeting • Canvassed voters on the party's behalf • Stood for office in the party • Stood for office in a local or national election
Individual Benefits	• Meet interesting people in the party (process incentive) • Respondent could become local councillor (outcome incentive) • Party needs MPs like the respondent (outcome incentive)
Collective Benefits	• Respondent is close to party's policy positions in the following areas: spending more money to get rid of poverty; encourage private medicine; put more money into the NHS; reduce government spending; introduce stricter trades union laws; give workers more say in the workplace.
Costs	• Party meetings can be tiring • Party takes time away from the family
Personal Efficacy	• Respondent can influence politics
Party Efficacy	• Respondent's party can change Britain
Party Identification	• Strength of the respondent's 'identification' with the party
Ideology	• Extent to which the individual is either on the extreme right (for Conservatives) or extreme left (Labour) of the political spectrum, based on the respondent's self-assigned position on the left-right scale.
Political Context	• Party won previous local council election • Party won constituency in previous general election

* Where there is more than one indicator of a given concept, appropriate statistical techniques (such as factor analysis or scaling) are used to combine the separate indicators into a single index. For the Individual Benefits, Costs and Efficacy scales, the measures are all based on the extent to which each respondent agrees or disagrees with the statement made. All statements as presented here are abbreviated versions of the originals.
Source: Adapted from Whiteley and Seyd 1998.

own judgements as to how plausible each of them is. The strength (or otherwise) of the arguments that are advanced at this stage of any inquiry determine the adequacy of the particular operationalisation that is provided. It is worth noting that almost all behavioural studies can be criticised, with varying degrees of justification, on the grounds that the operational indicators selected do not effectively measure the theoretical concepts to which they refer.

To those unfamiliar with computer-based techniques, the most difficult – perhaps the impenetrable – part of Whiteley and Seyd's work is undoubtedly their statistical analysis. For the purposes of the present exposition, there is no need to dwell on their statistical manipulations. It is sufficient to note that they specify and estimate a model of Labour and Conservative activism that is, for the most part, well-supported in their statistical analysis. The core logic of their analysis is that, if their theory is correct, individuals who score highly on the various independent variables will also score highly on the activism scale, and vice versa. The cost–benefit calculation at the core of their model holds up well. Where activists consider that the costs of activism have declined and/or the benefits of activism have risen, they become more inclined to engage in active work on behalf of the party. By the same token, where the perceived costs have risen and/or benefits declined, they become less likely to participate. At the same time, Whiteley and Seyd also find support for the idea that pure rationality cannot explain everything about activism. On the contrary, they find that expressive motives related to identity and ideology also feature significantly as influences on activism. They also establish that political context matters – though not in the way that they anticipated. They find that people's preparedness to engage in activism declines after a general election regardless of whether the local campaign is successful. They attribute this finding to an 'exhaustion' effect associated with election campaigning. Overall, however, Whiteley and Seyd show that if we are to explain party activism in the UK we need an account that combines rational and non-rational motivations with a clear specification of contextual effects.

If this seems a rather timid conclusion, then so be it. Whiteley and Seyd begin their study with a simple rational choice approach to the explanation of party activism. They then incorporate non-rational and contextual elements into their model. Finally, they seek to test their theoretical claims against the available empirical evidence. They conclude that the model derives considerable support from what is observed, but that there are inevitably other, unspecified, factors at work which also explain party activism.

Whiteley and Seyd do not claim to have developed a definitive model of activism. The implication of their empirical analysis is that further theoretical work is required – theorising which will in turn require further

rounds of empirical evaluation. In all this, Whiteley and Seyd are engaging in a process of *retroduction* (Hanson 1958). That is to say, their research involves a continuous interplay between theory and empirical testing, in which theory acts as a guide to empirical observation, operationalisation and testing and in which empirical findings are subsequently used to modify, revise and refine theory.

Crucially, however, because Whiteley and Seyd's research follows behaviouralist precepts, it is always possible for the dispassionate observer to know exactly what it is that they are arguing and to know exactly what evidence they are using to substantiate their theoretical claims. In the often vague and confused world of social science theorising and research – in which some writers seem almost deliberately to deploy obfuscation as a means of preempting criticism – these are qualities to be cherished and nurtured. Whiteley and Seyd's work analysis can obviously be criticised – particularly in terms of the operational indicators that are employed as surrogates for their major concepts. But, like all good behaviouralists, Whiteley and Seyd at least present a clearly expressed target for would-be critics. For behaviouralists, it is better to be clear and (possibly) wrong than to be so impenetrable that other writers are obliged to debate the 'meaning' of what has been written.

Conclusion: the behavioural legacy in the twenty-first century

Among contemporary behaviouralists, it is widely accepted that theoretical analysis must almost always be the starting point for serious empirical inquiry. This is not to say that theories cannot be modified, enhanced or rejected on the basis of empirical observation. Rather, theory acts as a vehicle for distancing the analyst from the potentially overwhelming detail of what can be directly observed, so that abstract deductions can be made about the connections between different phenomena. In addition, theory not only generates testable hypotheses but also provides guidelines and signposts as to the sort of empirical evidence that should be gathered in the first place. In short, theory plays an indispensable role in post-behavioural empirical analysis. Many post-behaviouralists would go even further than this in the direction of epistemological relativism. It often used to be argued that there was an objective social reality 'out there' in the world of observation waiting to be discovered by 'scientific' analysis. This view is by no means so widely held in contemporary post-behavioural circles. Not only do post-behaviouralists accept that theory must play a central role in social analysis, they also recognise the possibility that different theoretical

perspectives might generate different observations. Obviously, this possibility renders the task of subjecting rival theories to empirical testing rather more complicated. According to post-behaviouralists, however, it does not render the task any less necessary. Whatever observations a theory may engender, if it is to be considered a truly explanatory theory, it must generate falsifiable predictions that are not contradicted by the available empirical evidence. There is no reason why each theory should not be evaluated on its own observational terms. But unless a theory can be evaluated – that is, tested empirically – on its own observational terms, post-behaviouralists are not prepared to grant it the status of explanatory theory in the first place.

For behaviouralists and their modern post-behavioural counterparts, the main purpose of social scientific inquiry is to explain behaviour at individual and aggregate levels. The central question that behaviouralists ask is: 'Why do individuals, institutional actors and nation states behave the way they do?' Embedded in the behaviouralist notion of explanation is the idea of causality. Although behaviouralists are aware that causality may be as much a reflection of the way we think about the world as it is of 'reality', they none the less insist that, unless a theory makes some sort of causal statement, it cannot be deemed to explain anything. They also insist that, if an explanation is to be believed, it must make empirically falsifiable predictions that can be tested against observation. While it is never possible definitively to establish that a particular causal relationship exists, it is possible to determine how far a particular set of empirical observations is consistent with a specific proposition that links different phenomena together. For behaviouralists, in short, believable explanatory theories must be capable of receiving, and must receive, empirical support. Post-behaviouralists argue, with considerable justification, that nearly all social researchers who work with empirical materials subscribe broadly to this view. In this sense, the legacy of behaviouralism among empirical researchers is enormous. In many respects, we are all post-behaviouralists now.

Further reading

The list that follows provides an outline of texts that both employ and offer critiques of the behavioural approach to social explanation.

- The best introduction to the philosophy of science in general, and to behaviouralism's place within it, is Chalmers (1985).
- For various critiques and related ideas, see Winch (1958), Rudner (1966) and Thomas (1979).

- On positivism and 'scientific' approaches to social explanation more generally, see Kuhn (1970), Hempel (1965, 1966), Hanson (1958), Halfpenny (1982) and Chalmers (1990).
- On the philosophical origins of behaviouralism, see Carnap (1936, 1950), Schlick (1974) and Ayer (1971).
- For a useful explanation of some of the terms used in these studies, see Lacey (1976).
- For justifications of quantitative approaches to the analysis of empirical evidence in the social sciences, see Blalock (1964, 1969, 1970, 1972) and King (1989).
- For a recent summary of the ways in which qualitative data can be employed within the 'behavioural–scientific' approach, see King *et al.* (1994).

Chapter 3

Rational Choice

HUGH WARD

The essence of rational choice theory is that 'when faced with several courses of action, people usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome' (Elster 1989a: 22). I will argue that rational choice is an indispensable part of the toolkit of the political scientist, because there are important political phenomena which it can partially explain. Nevertheless I do not claim that rational choice theory is free-standing (cf. Almond 1990). It needs other perspectives to help explain why individuals have the interests they do, how they perceive those interests, and the distribution of rules, powers and social roles that determines the constraints on their actions. First I briefly sketch how rational choice methods have developed over the last 40 years. Then I explain what rational choice modelling involves and examine the epistemological underpinnings of the method. I elaborate my argument that rational choice is best regarded as a toolkit rather than as an approach by considering the array of criticisms that have been made of it. Finally I consider some recent developments in rational choice, partly to show how rational choice theorists have responded to the criticism.

The development of rational choice theory

Rational choice arose as part of the behavioural revolution in American political science of the 1950s and 1960s that sought actually to examine how individuals behaved, using empirical methods (see Chapter 2). It has arguably become the dominant approach to political science at least in the United States. However, rational choice draws on the methodology of economics in contrast to behaviouralists who drew on sociology or psychology (Barry 1970). Anthony Downs (1957; cf. Downs 1991) was the pioneer in the application of rational choice theory to electoral behaviour and party competition and his work revolutionised electoral studies (reviewed in Hinich and Munger 1997). The individual votes for the party which, if it got into office, is expected to yield them the highest utility. Parties are assumed to be motivated solely by the desire for office, competing for votes by changing their policy platforms.

From Downs's pioneering work rational choice has flowered in a variety of directions. Mancur Olson (1965) showed that self-interested individuals would not always take part in collective action to further a shared goal. For example, why do so many of us continue to act in ways which harm the environment even though we know what we are doing is anti-social? A plausible explanation is that we feel changing our own ways will have little or no impact on the overall problem and there are major financial and other costs associated with living differently. The result is a collective action failure in which rational self-interest leads to everyone being worse off (Hardin 1969). His work constitutes a fundamental critique of pluralism and orthodox Marxism, which both assume that a shared interest is sufficient for political mobilisation to occur. It has generated empirical work in areas as diverse as the study of social revolutions (for example, Popkin 1979) and cooperation between states over such problems as the deterioration of the global environment (for example, Sandler 1997).

Game theory deals with situations where others' choice of strategy affects your best choice and vice versa. It has led to important developments in collective action theory, enabling us to explain why collective action failures can sometimes be avoided if the number of individual decision-makers is small (Axelrod 1984; Taylor 1987). Extensive use has been made of game theory to model nuclear deterrence, arms races, disarmament and other phenomena important to international relations specialists (Nicholson 1989; Powell 1999). It has also been crucial to attempts to explain the formation of legislative coalitions (Riker 1962).

The sub-field of social choice theory developed when economists asked whether any satisfactory and broadly democratic way could be found of aggregating the preference of individual citizens so as to arrive at a social ranking of alternatives. An example of such a procedure is to use simple majority rule, ranking x above y if x can gain more votes than y. This method has long been known to lead to a paradox where there are multiple alternatives (Maclean 1987). The key theorem, first proved by Kenneth Arrow (1951), is that no satisfactory democratic method of aggregation exists, so that the problem is not peculiar to simple majority rule. This result has led to further fundamental questions being asked about democracy (Sen 1970). For some authors, results like Arrow's, together with related results about tactical voting and agenda manipulation (Farquharson 1969; Gibbard 1973), call into question the idea that democracy is the implementation of the popular will represented by a social preference ranking (Riker 1982).

The central theme of the public choice sub-field is that the intervention of democratic governments to repair market failures often creates more problems than it solves. One argument is that the combination of the self-

interest of bureaucrats in maximising their budgets and bureaucratic control over information on the cost structure of state provision of public goods results in their over-provision, at the expense of the citizenry (Niskanen 1971). Another important theme is rent-seeking, organised interests successfully lobbying for monopoly or quasi-monopoly powers and subsidies from states, with consequent erosion of market efficiency and slower economic growth (Buchanan *et al.* 1980; Olson 1982; North 1990). The literature on the political business cycle, based on ideas about pocket-book voting ultimately deriving from Downs's work (Goodhart and Bhansali 1970; Kramer 1971), suggests that the search for electoral success through the manipulation of the economy leads to economic instability and a higher-than-optimal level of inflation (for example, Nordhaus 1975). The normative thrust of public choice theory is towards constitutional limitation of the size and autonomy of the state and disengagement from corporatist entanglements. As filtered through neo-liberal think tanks, public choice was crucial to the development of Thatcherism and Reaganomics (Self 1993).

The intellectual roots of postwar developments run back through microeconomics and welfare economics, nineteenth-century liberalism and utilitarianism, and the work of classical political economists like Adam Smith, to the work of authors like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. If rational choice theory owes intellectual debts to the liberal tradition, it has made repayments by suggesting lines of analysis and argument. For example, John Rawls's influential work (1972) grounds the idea that, within constraints set by the equal distribution of liberties and certain rights, it is just for society to maximise the well-being of the least well-off members of society. The argument is that individuals who (hypothetically) did not know what social position they would occupy, and are thereby impartial, would rationally accept a social contract embodying a principle protecting themselves against the case in which they turned out to be one of the worst off.

We can now see that rational choice is useful both to those trying to explain political phenomena and to those whose orientation is normative. Moreover, it is far from being the case that rational choice is necessarily wedded to the conservative agenda of its public choice variant, although this is the dominant orthodoxy among US rational choice theorists: while Rawls reaches broadly social democratic conclusions, the method has also been used to take Marxian political economy and the Marxist critique of capitalism further (for example, Roemer 1988). This is possible because what you get out of a rational choice model depends on what you feed in by way of assumptions, and the questions you pose. In the next section I describe the assumptions of the mainstream variant of rational choice theory in more detail.

The key commitments and assumptions of the mainstream variant

While recognising that human motivation is complex, mainstream rational choice theory assumes that, often enough, individuals are self-interested. The concept of self-interest is potentially extremely elastic. Is an Islamic martyr who expects to go straight to paradise acting in a self-interested way when he sacrifices his life in a holy war? Some would argue that 'moral motivations' should be excluded from rational choice models. I return to this question below.

The mainstream variant of rational choice assumes that individuals have all the rational capacity, time and emotional detachment necessary to choose the best course of action, no matter how complex the choice. The simplest problem conceptually is parametric decision-making under certainty in which each action has a known outcome (so there is no risk or uncertainty) and the relation between actions and outcomes is unaffected by the actions of any other individual (so that they may be treated as fixed 'parameters'). Individuals are assumed to be able to rank-order outcomes or, which amounts to the same thing here, actions. Thus, for any pair of alternatives a and b they can say whether a is better than b, b is better than a, or the two outcomes are indifferent. Also preferences satisfy the transitivity property. This implies that if a is better than b and b is better than c, a is better than c. To say that a is preferred to b means no more than that a would be chosen above b, all references to utility or other 'unobservable' mental phenomena being seen as inessential. To get non-trivial explanations preferences are typically assumed to be stable over time. Then rational individuals choose one of the highest-ranked feasible actions/outcomes available to them.

The first complication is that actions may lead to various outcomes depending on a random event; or individuals may not know the consequences of their actions for sure. It has been shown that, granted certain assumptions, individuals choose as if they were maximising expected utility, weighting the pay-offs from the various possible outcomes from the action by the probabilities of their occurrence. The utilities needed to represent decision-making here can be derived, at least in principle, from experiments in which individuals choose between lotteries over the outcomes, and can be interpreted as containing information about individuals' attitudes towards risk.

The most important idea in game theory is that of a strategy equilibrium. In games where binding agreements between players are impossible, an equilibrium is a set of strategies, one for each player, such that no player can increase their pay-off by changing strategy given that no other

player changes strategy. Strategic interdependence poses the problem of a possible infinite regress of strategic calculation of the form: 'If he thinks I will choose a then he will choose b; but if he chooses b, I will choose c; but if I choose c, he will choose d . . .'. This does not occur when strategies are in equilibrium. Suppose A's strategy s and B's strategy t are in equilibrium and that it is common knowledge that both are rational. Then if A expects B to choose t, he can do no better than to choose s; and if A believes that B thinks he will choose s, then B will choose t, justifying A's expectations. Strategy s is a best reply to strategy t and vice versa. Thus, at an equilibrium players' choices of strategy are best replies to each other and expectations are consistent. In addition, equilibria are self-enforcing, whereas non-equilibrium strategy choices are not: even if the players say they will stick with strategies which are not in equilibrium, there will be incentives to change for at least one player. The notion of equilibrium has been extended and refined in several ways, for example to allow: for the possibility that players use mixed strategies under which the actions taken depend on the outcome of some random event like the toss of a coin; for the possibility that coalitions of players can make binding agreements (Ordeshook 1986); for the updating of players' beliefs in the light of information they can infer from moves others make in the game (Morrow 1994).

To summarise, rational choice explains individual actions and the outcomes they lead to in terms of the courses of action (strategies) open to them, their preferences over the end-states to which combinations of actions chosen by the various players lead, and their beliefs about important parameters such as others' preferences. It proceeds by applying logic and mathematics to a set of assumptions, some of which are axioms about rational behaviour and some of which are auxiliary assumptions about the context that players find themselves in, in order to make predictions. Rational choice theory exemplifies the deductive–nomological approach to explanation. A number of advantages are claimed for this method (for example, Powell 1999):

- It forces you to be explicit about assumptions that are often left implicit in verbal arguments.
- It provides a 'positive heuristic' (Lakatos 1978) – a set of categories that help in constructing explanations, a set of exemplary examples of good explanation to emulate, and suggestions about fruitful lines of research.
- Because models are by definition *simplified representations of reality* constructed with a view to improving our understanding, it forces us to attend to what we want to explain, what is central to explaining the phenomena we are interested in and what can be left out of the model as peripheral or unimportant.

- If correctly applied it ensures that propositions actually follow logically; so the method can be used to see if a logically coherent basis for widely believed conclusions can be constructed.
- It goes beyond inductively derived correlations to provide a mechanism linking independent and dependent variables, running through the actions individuals take.
- It provides a unified framework of explanation across different fields of the social sciences and across sub-disciplines, allowing cross-fertilisation of ideas and a viewpoint from which common patterns can be seen across diverse phenomena.
- Even in circumstances in which action is irrational, it provides a standard against which action can be judged and indicates variables that might lead to departures from rationality. (Mansbridge 1990b: 20)

Rational choice theory takes individuals' preferences, beliefs and feasible strategies as causes of the actions they take (Little 1991: 39–67). Related to this, rational choice theory is typically seen by commentators as accepting the principle of methodological individualism – that 'bed-rock' explanations of social phenomena should build upwards from individuals' beliefs, strategies and preferences (for example, Almond 1990: 123). That is, rational choice is claimed to be *reductionist*, aiming to explain things in terms of the properties of individual 'social atoms'. Shortly I will dispute the claim that rational choice is, or indeed *can be* methodologically individualistic. If it were, it would be committed to an ontology in which only individuals 'really' exist, so that social structures, institutions, roles, norms and the rest of the paraphernalia of sociology are, at best, convenient shorthand ways of talking about individuals. Notoriously this position has been taken by some extreme neo-liberals like Hayek and has been influential in the development of the New Right (Self 1993). This leads to the thought that rational choice has an in-built conservative bias, as reflected by its public choice variant.

Almost all games that are remotely realistic representations of reality have more than one equilibrium, generating the problem of coordination of beliefs. In order to play rationally, players must have a common conjecture that one particular equilibrium will come about. If such a common conjecture is not present, even if players choose strategies corresponding to *some* equilibrium there is no reason in general that their strategies will be best replies to each other, for different players may focus on different equilibria when picking their strategies. Now a common conjecture is an *intersubjective*, not an individual fact (Bicchieri 1993). For example, in a two-player game it takes the form 'A and B believe the equilibrium *e* will eventuate; they know that each other believes this; they know that each other knows that they know this; ... and so on'. Clearly

such a pattern of beliefs form a *system* that cannot be reduced to beliefs of any one player considered as an isolated 'social atom'. Contrary to the folk wisdom in political science, it is far from the case that game theory is the exemplar of methodological individualism. Rather it demonstrates the *incoherence* of reductionism.

As I have already noted, to specify a rational choice model, you need to specify the rules of the game – roughly what players can and cannot do, and what they do and do not know. In practical application this amounts to providing a stylised representation of players' roles and powers. For instance, rational choice models of the relationships between chairs of Congressional committees and the individuals on the floor of the House and the Senate in the USA take as given the rules governing chairs' ability to control the agenda and often postulate that members of specialist committees know more about the consequences of bills in their domain than do ordinary Congressmen/women (Shepsle and Bonchek 1997). Models of this sort do not just comprise facts about individuals; they also include 'institutional facts' about 'rules and roles'. In ontological terms, they partly comprise taken-as-given socio-structural elements. I return to the institutional turn in rational choice theory, which foregrounds this fact (Hall and Taylor 1996: 942–6), below.

Most rational choice theorists are committed to some form of empiricist epistemology (see Chapter 1) – minimally that there are facts about the world, discernible through observation, that are 'independent enough' of the theory under test to be potentially able to refute it, in the sense of showing that some underlying assumption made is false (Nicholson 1983: 40–3). As we shall see below, there is a major controversy about whether rational choice succeeds in empirical terms. In any case it is by no means clear that a user of rational choice theory logically *must* be committed to empiricism – in any form. Some critics of empiricism try to achieve an understanding of a particular individual's actions from within their own frame of reference, denying that the social sciences should look for general laws well-supported by evidence. Rational choice is not inconsistent with such an interpretive, qualitative enterprise, because it can also be a way of investigating the meaning of others' actions, enjoining us to look at the individuals' desires and beliefs, picturing these as leading to intentions and actions (cf. Hindess 1988: 59).

Criticisms of rational choice theory

In recent years a stream of critical commentary on rational choice theory has appeared in edited volumes and monographs (for example, Barry 1970; Green and Shapiro 1994; Hargreaves-Heap *et al.* 1992; Hindess 1988;

Hollis and Nell 1975; Lewin 1991; Mansbridge 1990a; Moe 1979; Monroe 1991; Self 1993; Zey 1992). In order to provide a route-map I examine four modes of criticism: (a) the critique of those who wish particularly to emphasise bounded rationality; (b) the sociological critique, which centres on the way rational choice theory appears to downplay social structure and holistic modes of explanation; (c) the psychologists' argument that individuals often do not act rationally in the standard sense and are motivationally and psychologically complex; (d) the critique from mainstream political science, based on the implausibility of the assumptions made and the predictive failures of the model.

Bounded rationality

If nothing else, one would expect rational choice theory to able to give an unambiguous account of what it means to behave rationally. However, it has failed to do this. While there is general agreement among game theorists that some equilibria do not make sense, there is little consensus on how to 'refine' the equilibrium concept so as to narrow down the alternatives (Hargreaves-Heap *et al.* 1992; Morrow 1994). First, the existence of multiple equilibria reduces the predictive power of the model. Second it is not possible to define what rational action is unless a theory exists about how players coordinate their expectations on a common conjecture, and it is not clear that standard game theory has such a theory (Bicchieri 1993; Johnson 1993). While coordination of this sort might seem merely a technical issue, it is actually foundational for politics. For instance, Cox (1997) shows that many features of the way that electoral systems operate are explained by the need for like-minded groups of voters and political elites to coordinate their behaviour on a favourable equilibrium.

Some rational choice theorists feel that the mainstream model makes highly implausible assumptions about the rational capacity of individuals. Herbert Simon's work (1982, 1985; March 1986) on bounded rationality has been particularly influential. In the face of limited information, limited time and limited cognitive capacity to process information, Simon envisages individuals using heuristics built into standard operating procedures as a shorthand guide to getting a satisfactory result. While some see rational action as only possible on the basis of rationally-held beliefs (for example, Elster 1989a), for Simon action is procedurally rational if it is based on beliefs that are reasonable given the context the actor is in. Decision-makers carry on with what they are doing until the pay-off drops below a satisfactory level; then search until they find another option that is satisfactory. Such a pattern of decision-making will tend to give rise only to incremental policy change, which may be normatively defensible

when there is radical uncertainty (Braybrooke and Lindblom 1963; cf. Etzioni 1967).

There has been a recent resurgence of interest in bounded rationality in political science. For example, Ostrom (1997; Ostrom *et al.* 1994) calls for second-generation models of collective action based on bounded rationality. Game-theoretical models fail to explain patterns observed both in experimental settings and in fieldwork. An alternative approach would acknowledge that natural selection has left humans open to learning solutions to collective action problems and may also have selected for a degree of altruism (Gintis 2000: 237–83). Individuals develop a range of heuristics to deal with the problem of when and when not to reciprocate. They rely on communication and others' reputations for trustworthiness, and they internalise norms of appropriate behaviour which there are intangible costs to violating.

Where do the routines, standard operating procedures and heuristics emphasised in the literature on bounded rationality arise? One way is that players copy the methods of those who are more successful, possibly because of chance discovery of a good heuristic. Emulation of this sort has strong analogies to natural selection (Van Parijs 1981). Routines 'evolve' in repeated game-like interactions between players who 'carry' them as a sort of 'cultural genetic code', as relatively successful ones spread through the population of players by copying. Evolutionary game theory, which developed first in biology but can also deal with social evolution of this sort, shows that given enough time evolutionary pressures ensure that, to the observer, it will look as if players are using routines that form part of a Nash equilibrium, although not all Nash equilibria can be reached in this way (for example, Gintis 2000: 148–236). The reason is that if players' routines are not a best reply to what others are doing, they will eventually emulate others who are more successful. For instance it can be shown that in relatively stable environments, parties adapting their competitive strategies will behave in much the same way that Downs predicted, converging on an equilibrium in the political centre-ground (Kollman *et al.* 1992). If the predictions are the same as those of the standard models, some will ask 'why bother?' (for example, Friedman 1953). Beside being more realistic, the pay-off from an evolutionary approach may turn out to be that it can explain coordination on one equilibrium where there are several in the game, a problem I have suggested that is difficult to overcome in standard game theory. In evolutionary game theory, which equilibrium is reached generally depends on the starting point and dynamics of the process, because of path-dependence. While opinions differ as to the significance of evolutionary explanation in political science (cf. Dowding 2000; John 1998), it seems to me to have considerable potential.

The sociological critique.

Sociologists often claim that individual behaviour is largely a function of social structures. Choice is illusory for individuals and the rational choice approach based on individual choice is, therefore, unhelpful (for example, Hindess 1988). For instance, some argue that the Downsian approach is inferior to an account of voting in terms of the individual's position in the social structure. Social class, geographic location, gender, consumption and production location and religion, among other variables, all have known correlations, of greater or lesser strength, with voting behaviour (for example, Harrop and Miller 1987). In fact, in voting, as in other domains, an individual's structural location typically does not completely account for what he or she does. Neo-institutionalists often emphasise the way in which the institutional structures of government shape the world-view of politicians and bureaucrats, mould their preferences and define the options they consider when making policy choices (for example, March and Olsen 1984). Much of the time individuals follow rules rather than making choices. Classic case studies such as Allison's study of the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrate that organisational structures are very important, but that individual decision-makers such as President Kennedy still had enough autonomy profoundly to influence the outcome (Allison 1971). In general, it seems implausible either that individuals are fully autonomous or that their actions are determined completely by social structure (Hollis 1977).

Social structure

Even if social structure determines the individual's feasible set of strategies, their beliefs and preferences, rational choice can add to the explanation by making predictions when the rational course of action is non-obvious. This is especially likely to be the case where there is strategic interdependence of decision-making. For example, it is not at all obvious under what circumstances liberalisers within the existing regime and moderates among reformers will be able to sideline hard-liners and revolutionaries in order to achieve a peaceful transition to democracy. Przeworski (1991) approaches this issue using game theory, showing how outcomes vary with the pay-offs and beliefs of these social blocs. The conclusion is that the only plausible scenario for a peaceful transition is that liberalisers put a greater probability on their former allies, the hard-liners, being able successfully to repress a revolution than the opposition do; so the opposition actually push for change leading the liberalisers to cave in rather than face a blood-bath, forsaking their former allies. While this conclusion is certainly contentious (cf. Marks 1992), it illustrates the

capacity of rational choice to reach surprising conclusions from widely accepted 'structural facts' about social blocs and their interests.

Because they favour methodological individualism, many rational choice theorists argue that social structures do not provide basic elements of explanations in the social sciences; rather we need to explain the structure using rational choice theory (for example, Elster 1989a). This can be illustrated by looking at the debate between Theda Skocpol, who tried to explain social revolutions without using voluntarist forms of explanation like rational choice theory, and rational choice theorists like Michael Taylor. Skocpol (1979) used the comparative case study method to isolate a set of sufficient structural conditions for a social revolution, three of which were: external stress upon the state in the geopolitical arena; breakdown in the state's ability to maintain internal order; and strong community structures among peasants. Taylor's point is that these structural factors can be seen as the result of decisions taken by individuals: decisions to attack another power; failures by state decision-makers to invest enough resources in social control; and decisions made by the state which bolstered peasant communities in order to provide a bulwark against classes antagonistic to the monarch (Taylor 1989). Taylor's critique is a powerful one, but structural factors surely shaped the decisions to which he alludes. To take one obvious example: why were there states rather than some other form of rule?

In my view it is a practical impossibility for rational choice theorists to eliminate taken-as-given structural factors from any application of rational choice. As I suggested above, these enter models as the rules of the game. Beside being incoherent, it simply is not practicable to reduce explanation only to facts concerning individuals, as methodological individualism demands (Lukes 1977). I do not believe that practising rational choice theorists typically exhibit much desire to squeeze out structure: rather they often seek to illuminate how choices are made within structures, the agenda sometimes stretching to the consideration of how rational choices reproduce or transform structures. As such, rational choice can form part of a structuration approach. I return to this point when considering rational choice accounts of political institutions below.

Norms

The general points made here about social structure also arise in relation to norms. Drawing on the work of founding fathers of sociology like Durkheim, many sociologists emphasise norm-driven behaviour, with social norms understood as deriving from society's need for system integration. While recognising the possibility of anomic and dysfunctional behaviour, such holistic approaches typically downplay instrumentally

rational action. Rational choice theorists have discussed norms from two angles. First, norms can be seen as *conventional forms of behaviour* that solve coordination problems. It does not matter whether everyone drives on the left or whether everyone drives on the right: both solutions are equally good from the perspective of preventing collisions *so long as everyone expects others to follow the convention regularly*. In a game-theoretic representation, both solutions would be equilibria, so the coordination problem is another aspect of the multiple equilibrium problem alluded to above. Following the work of the philosopher Lewis (1969), it can be shown that such norms can evolve through trial-and-error learning, in a similar manner to the evolutionary games discussed above (Sugden 1986).

Second, rational choice theorists have seen norms as injunctions to 'be good' – to behave in a way that maximises *social welfare* when there is a collective action problem, so that the individually rational thing to do is to free-ride (for example, Ullmann-Margalit 1977; Gauthier 1986). For example, one way to explain why individuals bother to register a vote despite the infinitesimal chance that this will influence the outcome of a national election in favour of their preferred party is to say that citizens gain pleasure out of doing their citizen's duty. In deciding whether to vote they set this incentive against the costs of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; cf. Aldrich 1993). The general implications of this line of thinking are: that people are more likely to conform to norms when this has low costs; and that they do not conform unreflectively. For example, people vote because it is low-cost; they do not participate much in other ways in democracy because it is high-cost. Many sociologists start with the collective action problem when explaining norms (for example, Parsons 1937), though they typically use a functional analysis to explain norms in terms of the all-round benefits they bring and see norms as operating through socialisation rather than through incentives, something that many of them feel is a better description of how norms influence action (Elster 1989b: 106–7). While equating norms with moral incentives to 'right action' is common enough among rational choice theorists, some argue that this is inadequate because it ignores the corrosive effects of self-interest on collective action: those who do not adhere to the norm, or pay no part of the price of enforcing it, may, nonetheless, benefit if others conform (for example, Taylor 1987: 29–30). There are also empirical problems that I return to below.

Ideologies

Yet another variation on the basic sociological critique concerns ideologies. Ideologies can be seen as structures of belief, assigning meaning

to action. For many sociologists the key feature of human action is its meaningfulness to the individual (for example, Winch 1958). Many sociologists would argue that action can only be seen as rational or irrational within the context of a particular system of meaning, or discursive formation. In addition, action often cannot be interpreted from an instrumental perspective. Indeed, symbolic and ritual action are crucial to politics (Edelman 1964). Individuals' identities are formed in complex social processes in which discourses form and re-form, giving only limited autonomy to individual human subjects. Processes of identity formation of this sort are crucial to belief and preference formation, again suggesting that important elements of the rational choice model are given by discursive social processes unamenable to rational choice methods.

These criticisms are certainly significant, but the same counter-arguments apply. It is widely recognised in recent work on ideology and discourse that there is some individual autonomy from ideological determination; and ideological structures arise and are reproduced and transformed as the result of individual action, some of which is instrumentally rational (Norval 2000). To expand on this, individuals often combine elements of one or more ideologies in novel ways with a view to instrumentally furthering an interest, and this can have profound political effects. Moreover, while the view that ideology is false consciousness has been rejected by some on the grounds that there are no universal standards against which to judge the truth, ideology is now often defined as a system of belief that serves the interests of some and disadvantages others (Norval 2000). Party competition can surely be illuminated by this idea. For example, Thatcher's Conservatism drew on liberalism and traditional strands of Conservatism and was, to a degree, a deliberate construct. Few will deny that it is associated with increasing inequality in British society.

Can rational choice do any more than this to illuminate how ideological structures change? I believe it can, as the work of William Riker on the manipulation of issue dimensions in democracies illustrates (Riker 1982). Drawing on formal results from spatial theories of voting and elections (for example, Ordeshook 1986), Riker shows that politicians may destabilise majorities by inserting extra issue dimensions into the debate and may solidify majorities by encouraging the separate consideration of issues. While Riker sees such strategies as expressions of elite self-interest and anti-democratic, others have seen them as forms of statecraft which may be conducive to the general good (Nagel 1993). One way to develop Riker's argument – not necessarily the way Riker would have developed it himself – is to suggest that behind the manipulation of issue dimensions there lies the construction or mobilisation of ideologies which 'organise in' or 'organise out' certain questions and the interconnections between them.

Riker's argument makes very transparent how such ideological movements may be linked to the electoral fortunes of parties and the legislative fortunes of policies.

Rules and conventions

Organisational sociologists argue that, even if collective actors go through processes of deliberation with a view to achieving given ends, the processes are liable to be strongly influenced by: rules and conventions used to categorise problems; paradigmatic filters biasing the use of incoming information; limited efforts to search for available solutions; pressures to appear consistent, even at the cost of failures of goal attainment; the upgrading of means into ends in themselves; and other organisational pathologies (March and Olsen 1984; Hindess 1988). Often decisions are emergent, result from conflicting strands of deliberation, or from inaction due to problem avoidance or internal political gridlock. While many of these phenomena have their analogues at the individual level (see the next section), they pose a challenge to the way rational choice theory typically treats collective actors.

It is often held that rational choice pictures individuals as isolated social atoms – autonomous sources of social causality in the social process. In contrast, the focus of much sociology is upon individual interrelatedness. It is not that relationships exist between fully constituted individuals: rather relationships modify individuals' identity in crucial ways. The atomistic picture painted by rational choice theory is said to be in line with other individualistic ideologies which support the social status quo by denying the existential reality of social groups, communities, social classes, and even societies. At the same time, forms of political action which affirm individuals' social identity and which are not based on self-interest are denied the validating stamp of rationality (Benn 1976; Sen 1970). The very concept of rationality which rational choice theory celebrates is said to be historically and culturally specific to capitalist societies. Its logic is said to drive out other rationalities and forms of understanding, especially any notion of rationality which problematises the goals to which action is orientated (Dryzek 1990). In short, the rational choice picture of the political world is a distorted reflection of a reality only approached in capitalism, generating forms of understanding of the political realm which prevent all but shallow criticism of the social status quo (MacPherson 1970).

It seems to me that rational choice theory need not be committed to viewing individuals as isolated social atoms any more than it is committed to seeing them as self-interested: rational choice modelling starts with given beliefs and preferences, whatever their origin (Gintis 2000). The

notion that instrumental rationality first arose with the capitalist market economy is surely historically indefensible: as one mode of human action it has always been important outside the immediate family circle (for example, Sahlins 1972: 191–204). I showed above that there is an element of social inter-relatedness, concerning common conjectures, that cannot be squeezed out of rational choice explanations – unless it be by invoking a *social* process of evolution.

The psychologists' critique

Psychologists typically argue that individuals' motives need not reflect self-interest: envy is important and is incompatible with self-concern; and drives such as revenge, guilt and greed may exist, whether or not they are consciously acknowledged. Critics have been especially worried by the exclusion of altruism from most rational choice models of politics (for example, Lewin 1991; Mansbridge 1990a). They argue that the empirical evidence suggests that individuals frequently act altruistically in political life. For example, while individuals' personal economic expectations may influence the way they vote, there is considerable evidence that the general state of the economy also matters, suggesting that voters are often also concerned about the well-being of others (for example, Sears and Funk 1990). When individuals act in accordance with social norms, there also often seems to be some sacrifice of self-interest.

Normatively orientated rational choice is not wedded to the self-interest assumption. For example, social choice theory makes no assumptions about the motives which lie behind individual preferences, being concerned only with the problem of how they might be aggregated so as to make a choice for society. Rational choice theorists interested in explaining political phenomena have always been aware that altruism is important (for example, Downs 1957: 29). Their position has often been that applications of rational choice should be confined to those areas where self-interest dominates: a conclusion supported by some of their critics (for example, Green and Shapiro 1994). For example, Olson suggested that his theory of collective action would apply best to economic interest groups and not to philanthropic ones (Olson 1965: 64–5). The question then becomes how much room such a self-denying ordinance would leave rational choice theorists in which to operate.

One way around the problem of altruism is to suggest that individuals get pleasure out of others' happiness. It is not difficult to model such a phenomenon in terms of positive utility interaction between individuals (for example, Collard 1978). Margolis's model also allows for change in the relative weight attached to self-interest and others' interests, more weight being placed on self-interest given the extent to which the

individual has been altruistic in the recent past (Margolis 1990). Some advocate much more extensive use of this sort of modelling (for example, Mansbridge 1990c; Gintis 2000), but it raises methodological issues that I will return to below.

It has become clear that some forms of altruism can be disguised forms of self-interest. Biologists have pointed out that, because kin share genetic material, self-sacrifice in favour of close kin might increase the chances of copies of your genes surviving. So, kin altruism might be selected for in evolutionary processes. In addition, it may pay in evolutionary terms to help another now in the expectation that they will help you in the future, so that reciprocal altruism may also have an evolutionary basis. Game-theoretic collective action theory has done much to clarify the conditions under which such reciprocal altruism may occur in contexts where it is consciously entered into, as well as where it is selected for in processes of social evolution: 'nice' actions must be conditional on others being 'nice' in the past, with punishment for those who were 'nasty'; the interaction must not have a definite time limit; the individuals should not be too short-term-orientated; and short-term benefits from being 'nasty' should not be too high (Axelrod 1984; Taylor 1987; Frank 1992; Gintis 2000).

Many psychologists regard synoptically rational decision-making, approaching the ideal of the mainstream rational choice model, as relatively rare (for example, Rosenberg 1991; Janis and Mann 1977: 21–3; cf. Wittman 1991). Beside the cognitive limits emphasised by authors like Herbert Simon, emotions and unconscious drives make the level of detachment necessary for the synoptic approach highly unlikely in many settings (Elster 1989a). Decisions are often made more on the grounds of consistency with past actions, reduction of strains within the individual's belief system (cognitive dissonance) or normative orientation than through a calculation of the most efficient means to given ends. The norms that the individual adheres to and the affective orientations they have may prevent feasible options being considered and relevant information being obtained, as well as biasing decision-making away from what is instrumentally rational (Etzioni 1992).

Decision conflicts occur when individuals can find no alternative that simultaneously satisfies all their goals. This creates problems for normative decision theory (Levi 1986) and it also tends to generate behaviour which is irrational. Decision conflicts are a source of stress. Whatever course of action is chosen there appear to be losses; there are simultaneous opposing tendencies both to accept and to reject a course of action (Janis and Mann 1977: 45–6). Decision conflicts also lead to vacillation, attempts to avoid making a choice at all and forms of apprehensiveness which tend to lead to poor decision-making (Janis and Mann 1977). Regret about past decisions, made when decision conflicts were not resolved, may immobilise the

decision-maker. Where there is decision conflict, 'bolstering' – the retrospective, and perhaps unconscious, rationalisation of the idea that the chosen alternative is the best – is liable to occur if a choice is made at all (Janis and Mann 1977: 91–3). Where commitments to an existing path of action are strong, individuals 'bolster', carrying on in the same way, and freeze out consideration of other alternatives, even if they are aware that to do so is not necessarily desirable (Janis and Mann 1977: 15). Case studies of areas like foreign policy decision-making suggest that such pathologies are probably widespread in political life (Janis 1972).

New information is often not dealt with in a neutral way. Rather, it is fitted into existing patterns of belief and often ignored if it cannot be so construed. For instance, there is 'anchoring bias' or insufficient adjustment of initial probability estimates in the light of new information (Tversky and Kahneman 1982: 14–18). Individuals' focus of attention is very important to explaining their behaviour, for relevant and important aspects of reality are typically ignored (Simon 1986: 31). Individuals rely on a number of heuristic principles and limited data to estimate risks and these commonly result in mishandling of risk estimation. These problems are crucial to explaining decision-making in areas like foreign policy (Jervis 1976).

There are widespread, systematic and fundamental deviations in behaviour from the predictions made by the expected utility model (Hargreaves-Heap *et al.* 1992). For example, alternative descriptions of decision problems often give rise to different choices, even though they are the same from the perspective of the conventional approach (Tversky and Kahneman 1986: 73–9). While people will accept big downside risks to protect their status quo, they are averse to taking risks to improve their position, so their attitude towards risk varies depending on the framing effect of the status quo (Hargreaves-Heap *et al.* 1992: 38). Rather than holding subjective probability estimates which are analogous to objectively derived estimates of risk, individuals often have diffuse and ill-defined feelings about uncertainty and avoid ambiguity about the true risks they face (Einhorn and Hogarth 1986: 43–7). The desirability of options may affect perceptions of the chances of occurrence, as in the phenomenon of wishful thinking; or the probability of occurrence may affect their perceived desirability, as in the phenomenon of sour grapes (Einhorn and Hogarth 1986: 42; Elster 1989a: 17–20). Drawing on the above critique, prospect theory – an alternative to the mainstream theory of expected utility maximisation in the face of risk and uncertainty – has been extensively formalised and tested empirically, including in the field of international relations (Farnham 1994).

The idea that we are inhabited by multiple, conflicting selves seems to be able to account for a number of observable forms of irrational behaviour,

if only in a metaphorical manner (Elster 1985b). The idea has a very long history in philosophy and has been important to psychology, not least because of the work of Freud. Violations of the transitivity assumption fundamental to all the mainstream models of decision-making are common. This can be connected with the idea that individuals have 'multiple selfs' who see decisions from different points of view, leading to the impossibility of acting rationally in the conventional sense (Steedman and Krause 1985). While there may be a meta-preference ranking which tells us which self should dominate in a particular context (Sen 1977), decision conflict may be due to inner conflict between different selfs. Quattrone and Tversky argue that unconscious self deception – implying the idea of one self deceiving others – may account for why individuals go to the voting booth at elections (1988). The self-deception comes in believing that if you vote others like you will be encouraged to vote too, making it instrumentally rational to vote yourself. Recently Grafstein (1999) has attempted to rebuild collective action theory around this point. Weakness of will can be thought of as involving the inability of the 'higher self' to control impulsive urges, including the delay of immediate gratification in order to enjoy higher future pay-offs. The idea that we have both an instrumentally rational, self-interested self and a socially orientated, norm-driven self provides one way of thinking about the individual tensions generated when self-interest collides with doing what is normatively right.

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests that the mainstream models of decision-making will often be descriptively inaccurate and will make correct predictions only in more limited domains of application than some rational choice theorists believe. Of course, it can still be claimed that the mainstream models provide a standard of rational behaviour against which actual behaviour can be compared; and that some decision-making will approximate the mainstream model. Paralleling the arguments for the bounded rationality approach, there is a strong case for a more descriptively accurate model of the way in which individuals deal with information and uncertainty.

The critique from mainstream political science

Many political scientists claim that rational choice has a poor empirical record. Green and Shapiro (1994) are prominent exponents of this theme, their work occasioning furious counterblasts by rational choice theorists (Friedman 1996). They argue that the desire of rational choice theorists to generate a universally applicable model of politics leads them to evade and to ignore contrary evidence. Rational choice models are 'slippery' in that many of the variables, notably preferences, are not directly measurable.

This allows authors to evade falsification by, for example, altering the assumptions made about individuals' motives away from self-interest, as has been done to explain the facts about voter turnout in terms of normative pay-offs or mass collective action in terms of pay-offs associated with affirmation of political identity, among other moral motivations.

Rational choice does not require that individual preferences reflect self-interest: so long as preferences are well-defined, generating a partial ordering of the options, modelling can proceed. But when it moves away from the self-interest assumption, as it has done in some areas as the work of first-generation authors has been developed, it risks becoming untestable and vacuously tautological: individuals acted the way they did because they derived *some* benefits, we know that this must be true because we see them in action and some combination of self-interest and altruism will always give the right prediction (cf. Barry 1970: 19–23). Green and Shapiro overexaggerate the dangers, though. The keys here are to: make firm assumptions about the relative importance of the two motives in the particular empirical context concerned, so that the model is falsifiable; and look at other possible explanations of empirical anomalies that arise rather than favouring the rationality assumptions by making further *ad hoc* modifications to the motivational model (Ward 1996).

Green and Shapiro also claim that rational choice models are largely *post hoc*: modellers typically 'explain' a well-known phenomena in terms of a model derived, at least in part, through inductive reasoning from the observed cases, then use those cases to 'test' the model. They see the empirical claims of the rational choice approach as exaggerated, arguing that various alternatives provide better explanations, depending on context. While they focus solely on a limited field of study, American politics, Walt (1999) makes similar points about a number of well-known rational choice contributions to international relations (IR). These critiques ignore the many novel hypotheses and examples of rigorous empirical testing to be found in the literature. To take one example, Laver and Shepsle's (1996) predictions, derived from game theory and spatial modelling, about the polar importance of strong, centrally located parties to forming government coalitions, are both novel and well-supported empirically.

Green and Shapiro do not compare rational choice with other approaches (cf. Barry 1970): while rational choice may be poorly supported empirically in some applications, the same is true of approaches starting from, say, political culture or social structure. Indeed it is hard to think of any approach to political science that has not been repeatedly called into question by observed facts. A less naive methodological position would be to ask whether rational choice is *worse than other approaches* with respect to its empirical success in areas where there is overlap with their concerns; and whether it lacks progressiveness in terms of generating new insights

(Lakatos 1978). Only if the answer to both these questions is yes can rational choice be written off in empirical terms.

To summarise, in many areas of application the mainstream rational choice model is descriptively implausible, yet individuals do make somewhat rational decisions relative to reasonably well-defined goals. To stick to the mainstream approach is to put further development of rational choice theory in a straitjacket. Thus, there ought to be concerted attempts further to develop and to apply non-mainstream variants of the model, allowing for: bounded rationality; choice under uncertainty incompatible with the expected utility approach; and non-egoistic and 'moral motivations'. For instance, in collective action theory as applied to social movements the way forward clearly lies along the path of: examining a wider range of motivations (for example, Opp 1986; Chong 1991); contextualising individuals' perceptions of the likely efficacy of the movement and their own actions in ways that allow slippage from 'objective' information (for example, Dunleavy 1991); and examining action from the perspective of bounded rationality (for example, Ostrom 1997). Only then will collective action theory start to reflect the facts uncovered by the numerous empirical studies that show the limitations of the conventional approach, while suggesting that rationality has an important place in explanations (for example, Whiteley *et al.* 1994; Jordan and Maloney 1997; Finkel and Muller 1998). Methodologically, though, we need to be careful not be be overprotective of rational choice when it does not work well, even in modified form.

Developments: where is rational choice going?

Rational choice is not static but is an active research programme, responding to outside criticism. One change that is difficult to quantify, but easy to discern through reading top-rated journals, is that rational choice theorists increasingly are concerned to bring data to bear rigorously to test hypotheses derived from their models, as opposed to using anecdotes or finding single confirmatory instances. In part this is a response to the sort of criticism that Green and Shapiro advance. Here, I deal in a little more depth with two important trends in rational choice: the attempt to deal with unequal spread of information and the communication of information; and institutional rational choice, which has formed a significant part of the 'rediscovery' of the importance of institutions in political science (see Chapter 14).

A frequent, although ill-informed, criticism of rational choice is that it assumes every player knows everything that is relevant to making a rational decision with certainty. From the start, game theory dealt with uncertainty, as we saw above; but what information existed was assumed to be equally spread. Starting in the 1980s economists and game theorists started to model games of incomplete information in which some players have *private information*, that is, they know things that other players do not that are relevant to their decisions. These ideas have now percolated into political science (Morrow 1994). This opens up the possibility of modelling communication of information, including *false* disclosure of private information. Very often the information that is private concerns one side's preferences. 'Signalling' of what type of preferences a player has may also be modelled, information about this being communicated by moves the player makes in the sequence of the game that others can infer would only be made in equilibrium if the other was of a certain type. Signalling involves others modifying, or 'updating', their original beliefs about the other player, typically by reducing the range of possible types they might be, often to a single type. So aspects of learning are dealt with. Again, 'signals' of this sort may be 'bluffs' in which a player 'pretends' to be something they are not, to get a better pay-off through misleading others. The idea of equilibrium discussed above has to be modified to allow for these complications: in essence players' beliefs each time they move must support the actions they intend to take as being rational; and beliefs have to make allowance for logically correct inferences from the observation of past moves of others, combined with 'prior beliefs' at the start of the game.

Despite technical problems, this framework is increasingly finding application in political science and international relations. One application concerns communication between opinion leaders and citizens. One of the central ideas of rational choice theory is that it may be irrational to be fully informed when information is costly, as it is in most political contexts. Individuals will often rely on cues taken from ideologies as an economising device when making political decisions: for instance they vote for the party which has the ideological label suggesting it is most likely to serve their interests, because learning about parties' actual programmes is time-consuming, if not costly in monetary terms (for example, Downs 1957). Voters also rely on opinion leaders for information (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991 is a useful survey). The issue becomes whether citizens in a democracy can expect to get reliable information. Some argue that private information will only be transmitted among players who believe they have similar interests, so it is unlikely that information will be shared among legislators, for example (Austen-Smith 1990). However, there are incentives for opinion-formers to be trustworthy and to give reliable information, even to those who do not share similar underlying interests to their own. For instance, there are low-cost ways for voters to check information

which often deter false information being provided (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Voters can use the media and independent political commentators and the endorsements of interest groups they belong to or share concerns with as checks on information. By using a framework derived from games of incomplete information, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) do much to illuminate the conditions under which opinion leaders are deterred from sending false signals and the conditions under which voters will trust opinion leaders. So rational choice theory can engage constructively with the issue of false beliefs among mass publics.

The EU has been a major growth area for a second development that is worthy of comment – institutional rational choice theory (Hall and Taylor 1996; Weingast 1996). In brief, the focus is on how institutional rules constrain rational action and how and why rules arise. So, for instance, rational choice theorists have tried to show how EU decision rules affect the way that member states, the Commission and the EU Parliament attempt to get EU legislation as close as possible to their ideal; and how the power of the actors varies with the decision rule in force (see, for example, Tsebelis and Garrett 1997; Hix 1999 for a lucid discussion of the controversy over this approach). The key thing to notice is that this work takes *the details* of EU decision rules and institutional roles, in all their complexity, very seriously, whereas earlier work on voting in the social choice tradition proceeded as if simple majority rule with unrestricted possibilities of amending legislation was in place, despite the fact that this is empirically uncommon. Application of institutional rational choice to the EU raises issues crucial to debates within the 'new institutionalism' between rational choice theorists and those influenced by sociology and history. While the sociological and historical approaches to institutions allow at least some room for rational action within institutionally given rules, they also argue that institutions shape the preferences and discursive frames of reference through which actors see the world (Hall and Taylor 1996). While neo-functionalist theories of the EU postulate just this sort of moulding and reformulation of world-views and preferences, broadly towards a Eurocentric perspective, intergovernmentalism is much closer to institutional rational choice in assuming that governments pursue security and economic power, members of the EU Parliament pursue reelection, and Commission bureaucrats pursue more power (Hix 1999).

The view among rational choice theorists that 'institutions matter' was first developed in relation to the US Congress. A number of authors were able to show how the rules governing the interaction of the President, the Courts, the bureaucracy, the Congressional committees and the floor of the House and Senate alter outcomes away from what they might have been if there was straight majority voting on the floor of a single chamber, that is, distribute powers (for elementary expositions, see Weingast 1996

and Shepsle and Bonchek 1997). Others have called for context-specific versions of rational choice that take the institutions of other countries, like the UK and Western European nations, seriously (Tsebelis 1990; Dowding and King 1995), opening up the possibility of a comparative politics based on institutional rational choice.

Social choice theory set political scientists a puzzle: it led to the conclusion that there would be very little stability in democratic politics, because majorities are inherently unstable where there are open possibilities for amending legislation and vote-trading (for example, Arrow 1951; Riker 1982). Authors began to explain specific institutional features of Congressional decision-making as *functional responses*, institutions producing 'structure-induced equilibria' where there might otherwise have been chaos under majority rule (Shepsle and Bonchek 1999). For instance, the committee structure of Congress, where committees deal with particular issue dimensions *in isolation* from other issues, may stabilise majorities. In similar vein, Keohane (1984) shows how international regimes of cooperation – sets of rules, roles and convergent expectations over a particular area of interaction between nations – may help solve collective action failures at the international level, by facilitating cooperation through time, and Ostrom discusses the sets of institutions, often at the local level, that can best help prevent over-exploitation of environmental resources by rational, self-interested players (1990). All these authors are well-aware that there is an explanatory gap between saying that a set of institutions *functions* in a way that constrains self-interest or coordinates behaviour and the expectation that the institution will arise among rational players: just as in the related case of norms, discussed above, there may be incentives to free-ride by not contributing to institution-building or by cheating on institutions. So, for instance, many international regimes governing the environment are highly ineffective: nations sign the treaties but do not implement them (Young and Levy 1999). Moreover, if institutions structure equilibria and preferences vary over outcomes, there may be second-order conflict over what institutions to choose (Riker 1980). In response the second prong of the rational choice approach to institutions is to try to explain how rational players might have individual incentives to stick with them – the 'endogenous' approach to institutions (Weingast 1996).

How do economic institutions arise? How do they structure transactions in the market-place? Can institutional politics lead to inefficient economic structures (for example, North 1990)? Sened's discussion of the origins of the institution of private property (1997) is a useful expositional focus. Generally, institutions involve a new set of rules, grafted onto an underlying game, that alter the set of equilibria. To explain an institution, thought of in these terms, means to show that, in some game of

institutional choice: there is a decisive coalition powerful enough to impose the new set of rules; and these rules are an equilibrium of the institutional choice game. Sened's account of the origins of private property says that the state was a decisive coalition in the game of choosing economic rules. It had an incentive to impose private property whenever this increased its net revenue, allowing for an increased tax take due to increased economic efficiency and the state's cost in enforcing rights. Notice that Sened does not attempt an explanation of property rights that 'bootstraps' upwards from an assumption of homogenous rational actors, like some social contract theorists do. Rather a certain, historically given, initial distribution of powers and interests is assumed and then rights are inferred as equilibrium outcomes of play. In short, Sened's is a *structuration story* about the origins of institutions. Paralleling the point I made about social structure and methodological individualism above, I regard this sort of argument as both more historically plausible and more methodologically satisfactory.

Conclusions

Rational choice offers a valuable set of tools to political science. As I have shown, rational choice theory can help illuminate how structures arise and are transformed, but I cannot conceive of any rational choice model which does not introduce some premises about social structure from outside. Thus, rational choice theorists ought to give limited acknowledgement to the sociological critique, recognising that methodological individualism and fully reductive explanations are impractical. Its status is more akin to that of statistical techniques which are appropriate for certain types of data; it is not a stand-alone paradigm for understanding the whole of the political sphere.

Rational choice theory can be put to use by a wide range of social scientists operating within very different paradigms because the results derived depend so crucially on ideas about structure imported from elsewhere. But, like any other tool, it leaves its mark on the work: scholars using rational choice to develop some underlying perspective on society may well come to different conclusions from those using other methods. What is nice about the two developments I covered, games of incomplete information and institutional rational choice, is that the problems dealt with and many of the underlying assumptions are much closer to those that interest mainstream political scientists and political theorists than the first generation of rational choice models; but quite new insights emerge. While these insights might be empirically false, they challenge other forms of scholarship by their rigorous derivation and formulation.

Further reading

- Non-technical introductions to rational choice include Laver (1997), Maclean (1987), Shepsle and Bonchek (1997) – this is of particular relevance to those primarily interested in the USA.
- At the intermediate level there are Riker and Ordeshook (1973) and Dunleavy (1991) – this text is an excellent example of how a sceptical and empirically orientated political scientist can make use of rational choice alongside other approaches.
- Two books with in-depth technical coverage but virtually no critical commentary are Mueller (1989) and Ordeshook (1986).
- For those who wish to take game theory further there are Luce and Raiffa (1989), Rasmusen (1989) and Morrow (1994).
- From the numerous critical surveys available the most useful are Barry (1970), Hindess (1988), Mansbridge (1990a) and Monroe (1991).

Chapter 4

Institutionalism

VIVIEN LOWNDES

Introduction

Until the 1950s the dominance of the institutional approach within political science was such that its assumptions and practices were rarely specified, let alone subject to sustained critique. Methodological and theoretical premises were left unexamined behind a veil of academic 'common sense'. Outside of political theory, the core activity within political science was the description of constitutions, legal systems and government structures, and their comparison over time and across countries. Institutionalism *was* political science.

The 'behavioural revolution' changed all that. Rather than taking the functions of political institutions at face value, behaviouralists sought to explain how and why individuals acted as they did in 'real life' (see Chapter 2). The behavioural revolutionaries, as Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 11) argue, 'were devoted to dismissing the formalisms of politics – institutions, organizational charts, constitutional myths and legal fictions'. A generation later, rational choice theorists sought to explain politics in terms of the interplay of individuals' self-interest (see Chapter 3). From another direction, neo-Marxist accounts focused upon the role of 'systemic power' (deriving from capital/labour relations) in structuring political action and the organisation of government (see Chapter 7). 'Modern' political scientists of all colours seemed intent upon debunking the institutionalist certainties of their forebears. The clear message was that there was much, much more to politics than the formal arrangements for representation, decision-making and policy implementation.

What happened to the institutionalists who got left behind as these powerful currents took the discipline in new directions? Many continued to practise their art in the conviction that 'You only need to sit still, it all comes "round again"' (cited in Rhodes 1995: 57). Others have been stimulated to specify and defend their 'common sense' assumptions and methods – notably in sub-fields like public administration and constitu-

tional studies. In fact, by the end of the 1980s institutionalism had 'come round again' as the internal limitations of the new paradigms became clear. A 'new institutionalism' has emerged as a reaction to the 'under-socialised' character of dominant approaches in the discipline; both behaviouralism and rational choice theory had dismissed institutions as no more than the simple aggregation of individual preferences. The new institutionalists assert that 'the organisation of political life makes a difference' (March and Olsen 1984: 747). Even within rational choice theory, scholars have turned their attention to the role of institutional factors in structuring individuals' choices (see Weingast 1996). Neo-Marxists have developed 'regulation' and 'regime' theories to analyse the institutional variation that was played down by the structuralists of the 1970s (see, for instance, Painter 1995 and Stoker 1995).

Institutions are back in fashion, although not necessarily in their old guise. Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 25) describe the so-called 'new instutionalism' as 'the next revolution' in political science. The 'new institutionalism' operates with a more expansive (yet more sophisticated) definition of its subject matter and with more explicit (if diverse) theoretical frameworks. Political institutions are no longer equated with political organisations; 'institution' is understood more broadly to refer to a 'stable, recurring pattern of behaviour' (Goodin 1996: 22). The new institutionalists are concerned with the informal conventions of political life as well as with formal constitutions and organisational structures. New attention is paid to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships, and to the obstacles as well as the opportunities that confront institutional design. Crucially, new institutionalists concern themselves not just with the impact of institutions upon individuals, but with the *interaction* between institutions and individuals.

This chapter begins by teasing out the implicit theory and methods of the traditional institutional approach within political science. The chapter goes on to explore 'what's new?' about the 'new institutionalism'. It identifies core characteristics and key distinctions among the different new institutionalist positions. The chapter considers the challenges facing new institiutionalism, not least the charge that its many variants are based upon fundamentally incompatible premises. The chapter concludes by considering whether the multi-theoretic character of the new institutionalism may actually prove to be its greatest asset. Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 11) argue that new institutionalist 'revolution' represents the potential for rapprochement between traditionally warring factions of the discipline, and for overcoming the binary thinking upon which these conflicts have been based. The institutional approach, as will become clear, has come a long way since Rhodes (1995: 55) described it as 'a subject in search of a rationale'.

The 'traditional' institutional approach

Rod Rhodes (1988, 1995, 1997) has stalwartly defended the institutional approach in the study of government and politics. He describes it as the 'historic heart' of the subject and 'part of the toolkit of every political scientist' (1997: 5, 64). Rhodes seeks to tease out the main elements of traditional institutional analysis as applied, for instance, by Finer and Robson in the early part of the twentieth century and, more recently, by scholars like Johnson and Ridley:

> the institutional approach is a subject matter covering the rules, procedures and formal organizations of government. It employs the tools of the lawyer and the historian to explain the constraints on both political behaviour and democratic effectiveness, and it fosters the Westminster model of representative democracy. (Rhodes 1997: 68)

Eckstein (1979: 2) notes that practitioners of this approach 'were almost entirely silent about all of their suppositions'. Peters (1999: 2) characterises their methodology as 'that of the intelligent observer attempting to describe and understand the political world around him or her in non-abstract terms'. The silence regarding theory and methods actually tells us something about the approach – that it was generally unreflective on issues of theory and method, took 'facts' (and values) for granted, and flourished as a kind of 'common sense' within political science (Lowndes 1996: 181).

Critics of traditional institutionalism point to its limitations in terms of both scope and method. It was concerned (of course) with the institutions of government, and yet operated with a restricted understanding of its subject matter. The focus was upon formal rules and organisations rather than informal conventions; and upon official structures of *government* rather than broader institutional constraints on *governance* (outside as well as within the state). Critics have sought to 'out' the assumptions that lurked behind the descriptive method and disdain for theory. Peters (1999: 6–11) characterises the 'proto-theory' of old institutionalism as: normative (concerned with 'good government'), structuralist (structures determine political behaviour), historicist (the central influence of history), legalist (law plays a major role in governing) and holistic (concerned with describing and comparing whole systems of government). John (1998: 40–1) points to a strong functionalist tendency – that is, the assumption that particular institutions are the 'manifestations of the functions of political life', or 'necessary for a democracy'. For the modern reader, the old institutionalists' claims of objectivity and 'science' often sit uneasily alongside their polemical idiom and desire to foster the 'Westminster model' (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1 Traditional Institutional analysis in action: contrasting examples

- Looking at political institutions in the USA, Britain, France and Germany, Finer (1932) eschewed a country-by-country analysis (more typical of his time) and instead compared institution by institution (for example, parties, electorates, civil service, judiciaries) across countries. Representing an enlightened version of the traditional approach, he grounded his analysis in an understanding of the state as the 'monopoly of coercive power'.
- Woodrow Wilson (1956), himself an early president of the United States, studied the problems of 'divided government' that were beginning to affect the presidential system, and analysed the possibilities presented by parliamentary government as an alternative.
- Studying the emergence and functioning of nationalised industries in Britain, Robson (1960) provided a comprehensive account of all aspects of the organisation and management of public corporations. Despite the critical climate of the time, Robson was determined to defend the public corporations as 'an outstanding contribution to pubic administration', and provided prescriptions as to their future reform.
- Polsby's (1975) famous essay on legislatures was typical of the reductionist strain of institutionalist analysis; it focused upon 'how a peculiar form, the legislature, embeds itself in a variety of environmental settings'.

Sources: Rothstein 1996; Rhodes 1997; Peters 1999.

Rhodes (1995: 49) counsels, however, against erecting a 'straw man'. Many of the 'old' institutionalists adopted a far more sophisticated form of analysis than their critics imply. Herman Finer in the 1930s went out of his way to show that the study of constitutions extended far beyond written documents (Finer 1932). Nevil Johnson's work in the 1970s reveals a concern with procedural norms as well as formal structures (Johnson 1975). Exponents of the historical–comparative method from Woodrow Wilson onwards understood that the values underlying one system become clearer when contrasted with another. Moreover, institutional approaches have continued to serve political science well, within sub-fields like constitutional studies and public administration. In the 1980s and 1990s, the organisation of government was hardly a dull backwater for political scientists. In British constitutional studies, formal–legal methods were employed to compare changing political practice with constitutional conventions. At the same time, political scientists' calls for a 'new constitutional settlement' reflected the institutionalist tradition of liberal democratic reformism (see, for instance, Oliver 1991). The restructuring of the welfare state (in Britain and elsewhere) via the 'new public manage-

ment' also led to a renewal of interest in 'the institutional arrangements for the provision of public services' (Hood 1987: 504). The fragmentation of the state led British political scientists to seek to uncover the (often informal) institutional arrangements through which policy-making took place, reflected in the 'policy networks' and 'core executive' studies (see Marsh and Rhodes 1992; and Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995, respectively). Considering the future of the institutional approach, Rhodes (1995: 50) argued that: 'The focus on institutions and the methods of the historian and the lawyer remain relevant ... [but] Implicit assumptions must give way to an explicit theory within which to locate the study of institutions.' This is the challenge embraced by the so-called 'new institutionalism'.

The rise of the 'new institutionalism'

While institutionalism may never really have gone away, it was perceived by the 1980s as being outside the political science mainstream. March and Olsen (1984: 734), who coined the term 'new institutionalism', argued that political institutions had 'receded in importance from the position they held in the earlier theories of political scientists'. They criticised mainstream political science as 'reductionist'. For behaviouralists, institutions emerged out of the aggregation of individual roles, statuses and learned responses. For rational choice theorists (of the first generation, at least), institutions were no more than an accumulation of individual choices based on utility-maximising preferences (Shepsle 1989: 134). March and Olsen (1984: 747) asserted that political institutions played a more autonomous role in shaping political outcomes, arguing that 'the organisation of political life makes a difference'. Thus:

> The bureaucratic agency, the legislative committee, the appellate court are arenas for contending social forces, but they are also collections of standard operating procedures and structures that define and defend interests. They are political actors in their own right. (March and Olsen 1984: 738)

March and Olsen's proposition prompts fascinating questions – about what constitutes a 'political institution', about the way institutions 'do their work' (how can they 'define and defend interests'?), and about the capacity of individual actors to influence the shape and functioning of relatively 'autonomous' political institutions. The questions are of particular interest at a time of rapid institutional change. How, in Britain, are institutional innovations like privatisation or devolution affecting political behaviour, and how do they sit alongside the 'old' institutions of 'public

service' or parliamentary sovereignty? In the former communist countries of East and Central Europe, can the design of new political institutions shift political behaviour towards the expectations of liberal democracy? If political institutions are 'actors in their own right', how easy will it be for South African leaders to reform an army, police force and legislature that have historically 'defined and defended' white supremacy?

There is no single 'new institutionalist' response to these questions. Where the 'old' institutionalists were disdainful of theory, the new institutionalists are markedly enthusiastic, developing diverse (if overlapping) theoretical projects. Where traditional institutionalists employed a descriptive–inductive method (drawing conclusions from empirical investigation), the new institutionalists are experimenting with deductive approaches that start from theoretical propositions about the way institutions work. The 'institutionalist turn' (Jessop, 2000) in political science actually comprises a range of developments which, initially at least, occurred in relative independence from one another (Hall and Taylor 1996: 937; Rothstein 1996: 160). There has been a multiplication of institutional approaches: in a seminal article, Hall and Taylor (1996) identified 'three new institutionalisms' and, by 1999, Peters published a book discussing seven separate varieties (see Box 4.2).

For our purposes, it is important to focus upon the basic cleavage within new institutionalist thinking – that is, between 'normative' approaches and those inspired by a new, more sophisticated version of rational choice theory. *Normative institutionalism* argues that political institutions influence actors' behaviour by shaping their 'values, norms, interests, identities and beliefs' (March and Olsen 1989: 17). Hence 'normative' refers to a concern with norms and values as explanatory variables (owing much to the traditions of *sociological institutionalism*), and not to 'normative theory' in the sense of promoting particular norms. 'Normative institutionalists' argue that seemingly neutral rules and structures actually embody values (and power relationships), and determine 'appropriate' behaviour within given settings. Institutions 'simplify' political life by ensuring that 'some things are taken for granted in deciding other things' (March and Olsen 1989: 17).

Rational choice institutionalism denies that institutional factors 'produce behaviour' or shape individuals' preferences, which they see as endogenously determined and relatively stable (favouring utility maximisation). Political institutions influence behaviour by affecting 'the structure of a situation' in which individuals select strategies for the pursuit of their preferences (Ostrom 1982: 5–7). Institutions provide information about others' likely future behaviour, and about the incentives (and disincentives) attached to different courses of action. While normative institutionalists stress the embeddedness of political institutions within temporal and

Box 4.2 The seven strains of new institutionalism

Normative institutionalists study how the norms and values embodied in political institutions shape the behaviour of individuals (see the seminal work of March and Olsen 1984 and 1989).

Rational choice institutionalists argue that political institutions are systems of rules and inducements within which individuals attempt to maximise their utilities (see Weingast 1986 for a review of rational choice approaches).

Historical institutionalists look at how choices made about the institutional design of government systems influence the future decision-making of individuals (see Hall and Taylor 1996 for a review).

Empirical institutionalists, who most closely resemble the 'traditional' approach, classify different institutional types and analyse their practical impact upon government performance (see Peters 1996 for a review).

International institutionalists show that the behaviour of states is steered by the structural constraints (formal and informal) of international political life (for an accessible example, see Rittberger 1993).

Sociological institutionalists study the way in which institutions create meaning for individuals, providing important theoretical building-blocks for normative institutionalism within political science (see Meyer and Rowan 1991 for the classic statement).

Network institutionalists show how regularised, but often informal, patterns of interaction between individuals and groups shape political behaviour (see the Marsh and Rhodes 1992 edited collection).

Sources: Adapted from Peters 1999, with reference to the original authors.

cultural contexts, rational choice theorists argue that institutions are purposeful human constructions designed to solve collective action problems. These distinctions are explored further as the chapter progresses.

The other versions of new institutionalism described in Box 4.2 denote particular clusters of academic activity and the elaboration of institutionalist insights in different contexts, rather than representing distinct ontological positions in their own right. *Historical institutionalism*, the most extensive body of empirical work to date, is decidedly eclectic, developing both normative and rational choice explanations of the relationship between institutions and action (Hall and Taylor 1996: 940). Similarly, *international institutionalism* incorporates both value-based and game-theoretical approaches (Peters 1999: 137). *Empirical institutionalism* has an affinity with rational choice theory to the extent that it assumes institutional designers to have 'a virtually free choice of institutional

forms' (Peters 1999: 92). *Network institutionalism* argues that common values and objectives are the 'glue' that ensures network stability but, as Marsh and Rhodes (1992: 196) argue, consensus is the product of 'a continuing process of re-negotiation' among actors with different power resources. For network institutionalists, both norm-governed behaviour and strategic, rational action play a role in reproducing institutions over time (see Lowndes 1996: 194–5).

We return later in the chapter to the compatibility (or otherwise) of different institutional approaches. Our next concern is to identify the core features of the 'new institutionalism', whilst acknowledging the key distinction between normative and rational choice variants.

What's new about new institutionalism? The core features of the approach

Taking new institutionalism as a 'broad, if variegated, approach' (Peters 1999: 149), what are the ways in which we can say it has taken forward the study of institutions in political science? What value have the 'new institutionalists' added to traditional political science perspectives? Because of the variety of positions represented by both the 'old' and the 'new' institutionalism, it is not helpful to draw too sharp a contrast between the two. In many cases, new institutionalism is actually building upon the insights of the best of the traditional institutionalists, within the context of more explicit and sophisticated theoretical frameworks. The points of departure represented by the new institutionalism are, therefore, best represented in terms of movement along six analytical continua:

(i)   From a focus on organisations to a focus on rules
(ii) From a formal to an informal conception of institutions
(iii) From a static to a dynamic conception of institutions
(iv) From submerged values to a value-critical stance
(v)   From a holistic to a disaggregated conception of institutions
(vi) From independence to embeddedness

The discussion that follows attempts to capture what Goodin (1996: 20) calls 'the moving spirit of the new institutionalism', whilst recognising that important differences exist among new institutionalist positions.

(i) From a focus on organisations to a focus on rules

New institutionalism represents a departure from what Fox and Miller (1995: 92) call the 'brass name-plate' tradition of institutional analysis. Political institutions are no longer equated with political organisations;

rather, they are seen as sets of 'rules' that guide and constrain the behaviour of individual actors. Rather than focusing upon Britain's Ministry of Defence as an institution, for example, new institutionalists are more likely to study the decision-making, budgetary, or procurement procedures within it. Institutional rules are important because they provide information on others' likely future behaviour and on sanctions for non-compliance (Knight 1992: 17). For those on the 'normative' wing of the new institutionalism, rules work by determining 'appropriate' behaviour (March and Olsen 1984, 1989); for those influenced by rational choice assumptions, rules determine the basis of exchanges between utility-maximising actors (Weingast 1996). Institutions, then, provide the 'rules of the game', while organisations – like individuals – are players within that game. The institutional dynamics of the Ministry of Defence are best understood by studying the particular combination of institutions *within* it, which are themselves influenced by the 'rules' that characterise the wider governmental, legal and financial systems (and which, as we shall see below, do not necessarily 'fit' neatly together). As Fox and Miller (1995: 92) explain, institutions are sets of rules that exist 'within' and 'between' organisations, 'as well as under, over and around them'. While organisations are not 'the same as' institutions, they remain an important focus for new institutionalist analysis – in their role as collective actors subject to wider institutional constraints, and also as arenas within which institutional rules are developed and expressed.

(ii) From a formal to an informal conception of institutions

In contrast to the traditional institutional approach, new institutionalism focuses upon informal conventions as well as formal rules. In British local government, for example, some rules are consciously designed and clearly specified (like contracts, job descriptions, committee terms of reference, budget systems), while others take the form of unwritten conventions (concerning, for instance, the role of the party group in decision-making or the relations between parties in a 'hung' administration). As Anthony Giddens (1999: 124) has argued, formal rules 'should be taken not as exemplifying rules in general but as specific types of formulated rule'. The informal rules of political life – while hard to research – can be every bit as important in shaping actors' behaviour as formally agreed procedures. Informal conventions may reinforce formal rules. New rules about the separation of the executive and assembly function in British local government, for example, are influencing political behaviour to a greater extent in those cities which already have a strong tradition of civic leadership. Dominant informal conventions may also override formal rules (as in the fate of many 'equal opportunities' initiatives!), or serve to

incorporate (and 'defuse') changes in formal arrangements. The 'Next Steps' agencies, created in the 1980s in British central government, were intended to separate managerial and policy control, yet some ministers continued to draw upon informal conventions in seeking to influence agency 'chief executives'. Studies of policy networks show how informal mechanisms for policy-making may exist alongside formal arrangements as a parallel institutional framework (see Lowndes 1996: 192–3). A focus on informal as well as formal rules adds breadth as well as depth to an understanding of political institutions.

(iii) From a static to a dynamic conception of institutions

Stability is a characteristic of institutions: three decades ago, Huntington (1968) defined political institutions as 'stable, valued and recurring patterns of behaviour'. March and Olsen (1989: 16) see institutions as 'creating and sustaining islands of imperfect and temporary organisation in potentially inchoate political worlds'. New institutionalists are concerned to explore how institutional stability is accomplished through human action. Institutions are not 'things', as implied in some traditional approaches, but processes. Institutional rules have to be sustained over time – what drives (and interrupts) the ongoing process of institutionalisation is, however, a matter of debate (Lowndes 1996: 193–4). Those new institutionalists influenced by rational choice theory argue that institutional arrangements will persist only as long as they serve the interests of utility-seeking rational actors (crucially as a means of solving collective action problems) (Shepsle 1989: 134). Others argue that institutions tend to change incrementally in response to environmental signals, as individuals seek 'to encode the novelties they encounter into new routines' (March and Olsen 1989: 34). Those adopting a network perspective emphasise that institutional stability is dependent upon a continuing process of consensus and coalition-building among actors, within a continually changing environment (Marsh and Rhodes 1992: 196). While not ruling out the possibility of intentional institutional change, normative institutionalists emphasise that change is messy and hard to control – given the interplay of vested interests and the interaction of political institutions with wider institutional contexts (these points are discussed further under (v) and (vi) below).

(iv) From submerged values to a value-critical stance

As we saw earlier, the 'old' institutionalism had an explicit concern with 'good government', and an implicit commitment to a particular set of values and model of government. In contrast, new institutionalists seek to

identify the various ways in which institutions embody – and shape – societal values, which may themselves be contested and in flux. On the 'normative' wing, seemingly neutral procedures and arrangements are seen as embodying particular values, interests and identities (March and Olsen 1989: 17). For those influenced by rational choice theory, institutions are not seen as affecting preferences and yet, as Peters (1999: 19) argues, they must reflect some relatively common set of values if incentives are to function equally well for all participants. The value-critical stance of new institutionalism is well summed up by Pierre (1999: 390), who argues that 'the structure of governance – the inclusion or exclusion of different actors and the selection of instruments – is not value neutral but embedded in and sustains political values'. Offe (1996: 685) notes that institutions typically change when 'their value premises have changed or because they are considered incompatible with other values'. Turning the issue on its head, scholars like Goodin (1996) and Rothstein (1996, 1998) consider how political institutions can be designed in order to cultivate desired values within society at large.

(v) From a holistic to a disaggregated conception of institutions

In contrast to the 'old' institutionalists who tended to describe and compare whole systems of government, new institutionalists focus upon the component institutions of political life: electoral systems, tax and benefit systems, cabinet decision-making, arrangements for budgeting or policy-making, intergovernmental relationships, or contracting rules (Peters 1999: 8–9). Such 'institutions' are expressed through formal structures and official procedures, but also through tacit understandings and conventions that span organisational boundaries – both inside and outside the public sector. Institutions are understood as 'differentiated' in the sense that they do not necessarily 'fit' together to form a whole, or represent functionally desirable solutions. Institutions are also differentiated in the sense that they 'embody, preserve, and impart differential power resources with respect to different individuals and groups' (Goodin 1996: 20). Institutions embody power relations by privileging certain courses of action over others and by including certain actors and excluding others. A third source of internal differentiation arises to the extent that institutions are never fully 'closed' or complete (March and Olsen 1989: 16). Institutional rules may produce variation and deviation as well as conformity and standardisation. They evolve in unpredictable ways as actors seek to make sense of new or ambiguous situations, ignore or even contravene existing rules, or try to adapt them to favour their own

interests. When purposive institutional change is attempted, 'old' and 'new' rules may exist in tandem, governing interactions in different parts or at different levels within political systems (Lowndes 1999: 24).

(vi) From independence to embeddedness

Building on the insights of the best of the traditional institutionalists, new institutionalists stress that political institutions are not independent entities, existing out of space and time. Albeit from different angles, new institutionalists explore the way in which political institutions are 'embedded' (Granovetter 1985) in particular contexts. 'Historical institutionalists' study the way in which institutional choices made early in the development of a policy area delimit policy choices thereafter (Hall 1986; King 1995; Pierson 1996). Comparing political systems, or particular policy areas, in different countries, historical institutionalists show how institutions become deeply embedded, producing 'path-dependent' policy-making (Krasner 1984). Rational choice scholars have studied the interaction between institutional rules at different 'levels'. Kiser and Ostrom (1982), for instance, distinguish between operational (or day-to-day) rules, collective (legal) rules, and constitutional rules (the rules that govern the rules!). According to Goodin and Klingemann (1996: 18), institutional rules are 'nested within an ever-ascending hierarchy of yet-more-fundamental, yet-more-authoritative rules and regimes and practices and procedures'. Elsewhere, institutionalists have focused upon the 'bottom-up' influence of locally specific institutional constraints. The social capital debate is concerned with the relationship between institutions of civil society and the performance of political institutions (Putnam 1993). From an organisation theory perspective, Clegg shows how locally specific institutional environments serve to reinforce or undermine society-wide institutional frameworks (1990: 163). The diversity of political institutions arises at least in part from their interaction with non-political institutions at the local level, which creates opportunities 'to do not only different things but also the same things differently' (Clegg 1990: 151).

New institutionalist dilemmas

We have established 'what's new' about new institutionalism as a broad approach. It reasserts what the best of the 'old' institutionalists also knew: that political structures shape political behaviour and are themselves normatively and historically embedded. New institutionalists take care not to equate political institutions with political organisations: 'institution' is

understood more broadly to refer to a 'stable, recurring pattern of behaviour' (Goodin 1996: 22). The new institutionalists are concerned with the informal conventions of political life as well as with formal constitutions and organisational structures. New attention is paid to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships, and to the obstacles as well as the opportunities that confront institutional design. Crucially, new institutionalists concern themselves not just with the impact of institutions upon individuals, but with the *interaction* between institutions and individuals. In contrast to the traditional approach, the new institutionalists are interested in testing theoretical models of how institutions affect behaviour, rather than relying upon a descriptive–inductive method to generate conclusions. Box 4.3 provides a selection of examples of new institutionalist approaches in action.

Box 4.3 New institutionalist analysis in action: some diverse examples

- Comparing Britain, Sweden and the USA, Steinmo (1993) showed that constitutions influenced the distribution of tax burdens more than the organisational strength of different social classses.
- In a comparison of health policy in France, Sweden and Switzerland, Immergut (1992) showed how the institututionalisation of 'veto points' explained the influence of pressure groups more than the initial strength of the groups themselves.
- Explaining the shift from Keynesianism to monetarism in the UK, Hall (1992) argued that political institutions structured policy by influencing how new ideas came to the surface and became expressed in government decisions.
- In research in southern California, Ostrom (1990) showed how voluntary associations established for the management of scarce resources (like water) changed the view of individual farmers about where their self-interest lay.
- Explaining variations in British policy-making, Marsh and Rhodes (1992) argued that relationships between political actors were differently institutionalised in different sectors, being more or less stable and exclusive.
- Comparing presidential and parliamentary systems, Weaver and Rockman (1993) showed that division of powers inherent in the former made legislation more difficult.
- In international relations, Rittberger (1993) argued that states accepted treaties and conventions in order to reduce uncertainty about the behaviour of other nations, whether friends or adversaries.

Sources: Peters 1999; Rothstein 1996; and original authors.

There are, however, many areas of disagreement among self-styled 'new institutionalists', and between institutionalists and sceptics in other parts of the discipline. Below we review three of the most hotly debated issues, finishing with the most fundamental – can the 'big tent' of new institutionalism really span the radically different ontologies of its normative and rational choice versions?

What is an institution anyway?

New institutionalists are agreed that political institutions are 'the rules of the game' – but what should be included in the category of rules? By including informal conventions as well as formal procedures, the new institutionalists are able to build a more fine-grained, and realistic, picture of what *really* constrains political behaviour and decision-making. An expanded definition of 'institution' runs the risk, however, of 'conceptual stretching' (Peters 1996: 216) – its meaning and impact diluted as it comes to include everything that guides individual behaviour. North (1990: 83) goes as far as to include tradition, custom, culture and habit as informal 'institutions', and for March and Olsen (1989: 17) there seems to be no clear distinction between institutions and norms in general. As Rothstein (1996: 145) notes, if the concept of institution 'means everything, then it means nothing' – how can political institutions be distinguished from other social facts? John (1998: 64) argues that the new institutionalists 'include too many aspects of political life under one category... [which] disguises the variety of interactions and causal mechanisms that occur'. On a practical level, how can political scientists recognise (and measure) an institution when they see one? On a theoretical level, how can they avoid the traps of reductionism and tautology? As Peters (1996: 215) notes:

> If the rules that shape behaviour are expanded to include implicit rules and vague understandings, in order to cover instances in which observed behaviours do not correspond to the formal rules of any institution, then the theory may not be falsifiable. If we observe behaviours that do not conform to the strictures of the formal rules then there must be other rules that were not identifiable.

Peter Hall's (1986) concept of 'standard operating procedures' offers a helpful way forward: the researcher's aim should be to identify the specific rules of behaviour that are agreed upon and (in general) followed by agents, whether explicitly or tacitly agreed (see Rothstein 1996: 146). Informal institutional rules are, in this formulation, distinct from personal habits or 'rules of thumb': they are specific to a particular political or governmental setting, they are recognised by actors (if not always adhered to), and can be described and explained to the researcher. The style and

form of questioning in a UK Parliamentary Select Committee, for example, may not be set down in writing; however, it is clearly identifiable as a 'standard operating procedure' that structures political behaviour, whilst expressing particular values and power relationships. This 'SOP' can be described, evaluated, and compared with alternative arrangements for scrutiny. In contrast, the way that a Select Committee member organises his or her papers (however regularly and systematically) is a matter of personal habit or routine, and does not qualify as an informal institution or SOP.

Standard operating procedures may be circumvented or manipulated by certain individuals or groups of actors, but actors in general are still able to identify, and reflect upon, the nature of such 'rules'. At the same time, new rules may be formally agreed upon but take time to acquire the status of a standard operating procedure. In politics, as elsewhere, rules exist to be broken as well as to be obeyed! Peters' (1999: 144) charge of tautology only really applies to those rational choice perspectives that *define* institutions by the creation of regularity, that is, by the acceptance of rules of behaviour. The notion of standard operating procedures offers institutionalists a way of combining a concern for formal and informal 'rules', and yet distinguishing political institutions from broader customs and habits. At the same time, a proper subject for study remains the interaction between political institutions and those institutions specific to other areas of civil or social life (see the discussion on 'embeddedness', above).

Peters (1999: 145) is right, however, to remind new institutionalists of the 'need for more rigour in conceptualisation and then measurement of the phenomena that are assumed to make up institutions'. In the meantime, historical, comparative and case study methods (not so very different from those of the better 'traditionalists') continue to dominate new institutionalist research, although investigation now tends to proceed from theoretically generated propositions.

Where do institutions come from, and how do they change?

As we noted earlier, stability is a defining feature of institutions; it is often said that new institutionalism is at its weakest when trying to explain the genesis and transformation of institutions (Peters 1999: 147–8; John 1998: 65; Rothstein 1996: 153). The way that change is conceptualised depends upon how the relationship between the individual and the institution is understood. While rational choice theorists see individual preferences as prior to institutions, other forms of new institutionalism see preferences as shaped by institutions. Rational choice theory tells us that political institutions are human constructions, designed to solve collective action problems – to maximise gains from cooperation. Institutions can be

'undone' when they no longer serve actors' interests – they provide only short-term constraints on individuals' behaviour (Peters 1999: 148). It has not, of course, escaped the notice of more sophisticated rational choice theorists that institutions tend to be self-reinforcing and remarkably enduring. These theorists argue that actors will only change institutions where the likely benefits outweigh the expected costs of change itself – which include the costs of learning how to operate within a new structure, of dealing with new sources of uncertainty, and of engaging in change (which itself presents a collective action problem!) (Rothstein 1996: 152).

Normative institutionalists, who see individuals' preferences as shaped by institutions, do not have an easy answer as to *why* institutions in general (or particular political institutions) come into being. They are better at describing how they persist and exercise their ongoing influence over actors (see Lowndes 1996: 194). As March and Olsen (1989: 17) explain, institutions 'increase capability by reducing comprehensiveness'; they 'simplify' political life by ensuring that 'some things are taken as given in deciding other things'. In Giddens's terms (1999: 127), structure is not 'external' to individuals but 'instantiated' in their practice. But if, as March and Olsen (1989: 159) insist, 'institutional actors are driven by institutional duties', how is it that they 'break out' in order to criticise exisiting arrangements or design new political institutions?

Normative institutionalism actually allows more room for reflexivity and human agency than might initially seem to be the case. Normative institutionalists expect institutions continually to evolve. Rules are seen as producing variation and deviation as well as conformity and standardisation; this is because there are always areas of ambiguity in the interpretation and application of rules (not least because individuals vary in terms of their own values and experiences), and because rules are adapted by actors seeking to make sense of changing environments (Lowndes 1996: 193). As Peters (1999: 149) notes, normative institutionalism 'permits the mutual influence of individuals and institutions'. 'Historical institutionalists' also rely on evolutionary models to explain how institutions change, predicting both incremental adjustment to changing demands (Pierson 1996) and dramatic moments of 'punctuated equilibrium' (Krasner 1984) in which new ideas become embodied in institutional form.

Goodin (1996: 24–5) distinguishes between three basic ways in which institutions arise and change over time: as a result of intentional design, accident or evolution. If rational choice approaches prioritise intentional design, then normative institutionalists do not rule it out. They argue, however, that attempts at institutional reform are hard to control. Once one 'logic of appropriateness' is destabilised, space opens up for deliberation over competing norms and values; institutional change 'rarely satisfies the prior intentions of those who initiate it' (March and Olsen 1989: 65; see

also Brunsson and Olsen 1993: 3). There are elements of chance at work (the 'garbage can' model of decision-making), but within a context structured by power. Because institutions reflect patterns of distributional advantage, institutional redesign may arise in response to, and become part of, power struggles among different groups. While rational choice theory provides us with a valuable hypothesis about why political institutions emerge (that is, to solve collective action problems), normative and historical approaches help explain why all political institutions are not alike. New institutionalists of all colours remain preoccupied with the central paradox, or 'double life', of institutions, which are both 'human products' and 'social forces in their own right' (Grafstein 1988: 577–8).

Are the normative and rational choice approaches compatible?

We have referred throughout our discussion of new institutionalism to the 'normative' and 'rational choice' variants. We have argued that they share characteristics of a distinct 'new institutionalist' movement within political science, but are built upon different theoretical assumptions about the impact of institutions upon political behaviour, and about the interaction between individual actors and institutions. Is this a sleight of hand? Some critics have objected to any attempt to seek common purpose, or even complementarity, between such diverse theoretical positions. Hay and Wincott (1998: 953) argue that the distinction between 'calculus' (rational choice) and 'cultural' (normative) approaches 'represents an intractable divide between two contending and incompatible approaches to institutional analysis'. They counsel against the 'cobbling together of institutional insights from differently-informed institutionalisms'. Hay and Wincott are not, however, advocating a retreat to secure, sectarian camps. Rather, they fear that any attempt at rapprochement between intentionalism and determinism will lead new institutionalists to miss the really important theoretical boat. Directing their remarks at historical institutionalists in particular, Hay and Wincott argue for the importance of developing a new, distinctive social ontology that *overcomes*, rather than reproduces, the binary thinking that has plagued political science since the 1960s. Such an approach would focus upon the mutually constitutive nature of individuals and institutions or, as Hay and Wincott (1998: 957) put it, upon the relationship 'between institutional architects, institutionalised subjects and institutional environments'.

Can the new institutionalism resolve the structure/agency conundrum, going where other theories have feared to tread? Hall and Taylor (1998: 960) are doubtful, noting that the argument 'has an air about it of the

search for an alchemist's stone'. They argue that, with increased 'intellectual borrowing' between the different strands of institutionalist thinking, the ontological distance between rational choice and normative approaches is actually narrowing:

> There is increasing recognition among rational choice institutionalists that the actors, the institutions within which they operate, and the common knowledge that informs action are culturally constructed. Conversely, many sociological institutionalists see actions as strategic and bounded by the mutual expectations of others. In these respects, a growing number in both schools share the core contentions of the other. (Hall and Taylor 1998: 959)

Jessop (2000: 13) suggests that the 'institutionalist turn' in political science 'could also be supplemented by a pragmatic turn', in which scholars desist from isolating *either* structure or agency as explanations for political behaviour. Discipline-watchers Goodin and Klingemann argue that the special significance of the new institutionalism lies precisely in its capacity to defuse the unconstructive stand-off between structuralists and behaviouralists that has bedevilled political science. They argue that the rise of the new institutionalism has been the 'single most significant contribution' to the 'period of rapprochement' which characterises political science at the present time. In a pragmatic rather than a heroic vein, they observe that:

> Political scientists no longer think in the either/or terms of agency or structure, interests or institutions as the driving forces: now, virtually all serious students of the discipline would say it is a matter of a judicious blend of both... it is a matter of analysing behaviour within the parameters set by institutional facts and opportunity structures. (Goodin and Klingemann 1996: 10–11)

Conclusion

We can conclude that it is misleading to describe new institutionalism as 'a theory'. New institutionalism is better understood as what Gamble (1990: 405) calls an 'organising perspective'. It is not a causal theory in the behavioural sense; instead it 'provides a map of the subject and signposts to its central questions' (Rhodes 1995: 49). As such, its value lies in provoking 'questions that might not otherwise occur' and in producing 'new and fresh insights that other frameworks or perspectives might not have yielded' (Judge *et al.* 1995: 3). The new institutionalism can be considered a 'broad, if variegated, approach to politics', held together by

the assertion that 'institutions are the variable that explain most of political life, and they are also the factors that require explanation' (Peters 1999: 150).

Where traditional institutionalists were silent on matters of theory (smuggling in their assumptions under a veil of 'common sense'), the new institutionalists are highly vocal. New institutionalism does not require any one particular theory, but it does demand a critical stance towards theory. The strength of new institutionalism may be found precisely in its multi-theoretic character, which allows for the assessment of competing propositions drawn from different political theories. As Rod Rhodes (1995: 56) has pointed out:

> No theory is ever true, it is only more or less instructive. You can learn from the critical assessment of one theory; you can learn much more from a comparative critical assessment of several theories brought to bear on a single topic. The study of political institutions will benefit greatly from such multi-theoretic research.

The contribution of new institutional approaches within political science is perhaps best understood in terms of 'epistemic gain'. Such a gain is constituted by the 'movement from a problematic position to a more adequate one within a field of available alternatives', and can be contrasted with 'epistemology's mythical movement from falsity to truth' (Calhoun, 2000: 538).

Further reading

Here are some introductory texts on the institutional approach:

- Chapters on 'institutions' in Goodin (1996) and Goodin and Klingemann (1996).
- Interesting articles – Hall and Taylor (1996) and Lowndes (1996).
- A seminal work on institutionalism – March and Olsen (1989).
- For new institutionalism, see Peters (1999) or Rhodes (1997).

Chapter 5

Feminism

VICKY RANDALL

Feminism is innately political. To the extent that 'It picks out and problematises the fundamentally political relationship between gender and power' (Höjer and Åse 1999: 73), it has had, and still has, a great deal to say to political science, although it is not always apparent that mainstream political science is listening.

Feminism however is not an approach that has grown up within the confines of social science. It originated outside academia as the ideology of a critical and disruptive social movement. As such its absorption into social, let alone political, science has been partial and selective and there remains quite a gulf between feminism 'out there' and feminist political science. In the following discussion there is inevitably therefore some disjuncture between characterisations of feminism as a perspective and its implications for political analysis, on the one hand, and the actual preoccupations and achievements of feminist political science on the other.

Furthermore, almost from the outset there has been a range of perspectives *within* the feminist perspective and this trait has increased with time until some might question whether feminism still exists as a single coherent project. Many now prefer to talk about feminist perspectives in the plural (for instance, Corrin 1999; see also Beasley 1999). These varying perspectives have differing and even conflicting messages for political analysis. Rather than maintain that feminism offers a coherent account or meta-theory of its own, then, it is more appropriately viewed as a kind of developing dialogue around a common but evolving agenda.

Taken together, these two traits considerably complicate the task of presenting a simple and single feminist perspective within political science. In the following discussion the focus will be on the more empirically-based and less overtly prescriptive or normative side of the discipline. The discussion begins with a brief overview of feminism, its development and differentiation since the 1960s. The second main section considers in tandem both the implications of a feminist perspective for political science and the actual impact of this feminist perspective on feminist-inspired political science. It begins by considering epistemological issues and then focuses on feminist conceptualisation and analysis of the 'political'. The

third section reviews the criticisms that feminist political science has encountered and the limited overall impact of feminism on political science, while the final substantive section considers possible ways forward.

Debates within feminism

Like most social phenomena that really matter, feminism is difficult to define, let alone to provide an agreed definition for. Probably the best approach to definition is historical. Feminism emerged as a movement and body of ideas that aimed to enhance women's status and power. It called into question power relations between men and women that were conventionally defended as 'natural'.

From the start, however, feminists differed in the reasons they advanced for existing inequalities, in the terms in which they framed their objectives, and the strategies they favoured for realising them. With the resurgence of feminism from the late 1960s, three strands were predominant. Two were well-rooted in traditions of thinking going back to the nineteenth century. Liberal feminism tended to build, though not uncritically, on many of the assumptions of existing liberal thought, with its emphasis on individual, rationality, the public–private distinction and the reformability of institutions. Though originally quite radical in its implications it was perceived by adherents of the other two approaches as too limited, too accepting of the 'system' with its inherent structural inequalities and so, by implication, as elitist.

Marxist feminism similarly built on the premises of Marxism. To begin with this meant either extrapolating from the classic texts or ingeniously demonstrating how women's oppression was in one way or another functional to capitalism. But the very problems thrown up by this exercise together with the challenge of Radical feminism soon impelled a much more open-ended recognition that the 'gender system' could have its own logic and a search for more satisfactory ways to analyse the interrelationship of the 'sex–gender' system and class (for an excellent overview see Barrett 1988). Some have wanted to call this 'dual systems' approach 'socialist feminism'.

Radical feminism was the newest, least precedented, element. In intellectual terms it led the way, uncompromisingly identifying the sex war as the most basic political struggle and thereby clearing a vital space for the analysis of the mechanisms of male power or 'patriarchy' and the different battlegrounds on which it must be fought. Much more insistently than either liberal or Marxist feminism, it highlighted the 'private' sphere as the terrain where women's oppression was founded. And although it is

unfair to charge Radical feminists with simple biological reductionism, through their exposé of rape, domestic violence and sexual abuse, and through their critique of pornography, they drew attention to the physical/sexual dimension of male oppression.

Over time the strands evolved, partly as a consequence of their interaction, partly in tandem, as Diana Coole (1990) points out, with shifts in feminist practice, but also, especially in the case of Marxist feminism, in response to developments in related theoretical perspectives. The different strands of early second-wave feminism took contrasting positions on a series of questions to do with the origins and mechanisms of inequality or oppression and strategies to oppose it. These included attitudes to political participation and the state, as discussed below. However they had in common a tendency both to regard women as a self-evident and straightforward category and to assume that while women were clearly not the same as men – or why the need for feminism? – the differences between them had been exaggerated and invoked where they were not relevant, that is, a tendency to stress similarity. But as time moved on, a further axis of differentiation emerged that to some extent cut across these older categories of feminism, and which turned on the whole issue of 'difference'.

To begin with, the ontological basis of male–female difference appeared increasingly contentious and problematic. Were the differences between male and female 'nature' physiologically determined or essential in some sense, or were they more a cultural outcome? In this context Marxist feminists began a move away from simple sex categories to the concept of 'gender', which was meant to emphasise its historically contingent and socially constructed character, as in Rubin's notion (1975) of a sex–gender system. The implication was a contrast between the biologically given 'sex' and its cultural transformation into gender.

At the same time within Radical feminism, a current was emerging which its detractors labelled 'cultural' or 'pro-woman' feminism and which accepted and celebrated 'difference' or women's distinctive nature, especially maternal, caring qualities associated with their child-bearing and rearing role. Just how far this approach has constituted a form of essentialism or biological determinism is open to question. In writers like Rich (1977) there is a strong intimation of a link between women's bodily differences and female creativity, whilst others, like Ruddick (1980), prefer to stress the impact of women's experience.

But these attempts to elaborate 'woman' as the subject of feminism and in opposition to man inevitably invited further questions about the differences *between* women. This issue had already arisen in the context of the Radical-lesbian critique of heterosexuality. It was most forcefully posed, however, when simultaneously, in Britain and the United States,

black women protested against their implied exclusion from the white feminist movement. That is, feminism itself was serving to rearticulate the differences amongst women of class, sexuality, race and so forth which had been there all along. Marxist feminists who had already striven to integrate sex and class seemed initially better placed to bring race into their analysis but in the longer run this burgeoning politics of 'identity' has posed a huge challenge for a coherent feminist project both as thought and as movement.

Partly as a response to this endemic problem of difference but also reflecting current radical, intellectual trends, a number of influential feminists, including some former Marxist feminists, have more lately been drawn to post-structuralist approaches that emphasise the contingent and discursive nature of *all* identities. This approach incidentally calls into question the social constructionist understanding of gender. Rather than avoiding essentialism, it is argued, the uncoupling of sex and gender simply puts essentialism at one remove. Sex remains a largely uninterrogated category, when it should instead be recognised that sex differences are themselves socially constructed, refracted through the lens of gender (Nicholson 1995). Beyond this point, we arrive at the view that the anatomical body is itself a discursive construct, where the very notion of corporeality is problematised.

But by this process of reasoning, post-structuralism also calls into question the identity 'woman'. As a result its feminist critics have charged that whilst it may provide an effective tool for deconstructing and thereby undermining masculine foundational concepts, by the same token, through problematising the notion of 'woman', it removes the intellectual grounding of feminism as a political project. Can one really be a feminist and a post-structuralist? Butler (1992: 16), responding to these concerns, has accepted that at times it may be politically necessary to speak 'as and for women', that is, to use this language in a rhetorical or strategic way. But, in a formulation that aptly illustrates another criticism often made of post-structuralism – its intellectual opacity and elitism – , she still insists that feminism can retain the category of women only if it 'presupposes that "women" designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category' so that 'the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability'.

To summarise the argument of this section, whilst feminism can be understood historically as a movement challenging entrenched male power, it has always encompassed great diversity. The three main strands emerging in the 1960s, Radical, Marxist and liberal feminism, have themselves evolved, whilst new debates and strands have appeared that cut across their original differences. Much of the more recent debate has centred precisely on the nature of the subject of feminism, 'woman'. We

need to be conscious of these internal arguments, together with ongoing arguments about whether and how women should engage with public politics and the state, which are elaborated further below, when we consider the implications of a 'feminist perspective' for political science.

Feminism and political science

Given its central concern with the power relationships between women and men, I have already suggested that feminism should be of the greatest relevance to how we think of and analyse politics. This next section considers some of the main potential implications of (different strands of) feminism for political analysis at the same time as describing more specific ways in which feminism has been taken up in practice.

Traditionally political scientists were almost all men and the spheres of public politics they studied were likewise overwhelmingly male. Political science either ignored the subject of women, referred to women primarily in terms of their relationship with significant men or, if obliged to consider them more directly, was happy to reproduce stereotypical and sexist understandings of women's nature. Perhaps the most cited and blatant example is the American political scientist Robert Lane's reflection on the adverse consequences of feminism:

> It is too seldom remembered in the American society that working girls and career women, and women who insistently serve the community in volunteer capacities, and women with extracurricular interests of an absorbing kind are often borrowing their time and attention and capacity for relaxed play and love from their children to whom it rightfully belongs. As Kardiner points out, the rise in juvenile delinquency (and, he says, homosexuality) is partly to be attributed to the feminist movement and what it did to the American mother.
> (Lane 1959: 355)

Numbers of women within the discipline, whilst still relatively low, have grown from the 1970s and, influenced by developments in feminism as a movement and body of thought, many have sought to apply insights derived from feminism in their own analysis. In this connection a distinction is often made between different 'stages' in this process, whilst recognising that these stages have not always been chronologically distinct (Carroll and Zerilli 1993; Lovenduski 1998). The first stage was mounting a critique of male political science for its virtual exclusion of women as political actors (Bourque and Grossholtz 1974; Iglitzin 1974). There was a parallel move by feminist political theorists to expose the misogynist

tendencies of traditional political thought (Brenan and Pateman 1979; Clarke and Lange 1979).

Closely related to this enterprise was a second stage which is sometimes rather dismissively referred to as 'adding women in', and entailed a much more systematic investigation into the extent of women's underrepresentation and its institutional and non-institutional causes. As, partly as a consequence of feminist ideas and activism, more women came to be involved in public politics, new questions also arose about the forms and *impact* of their participation. Whilst the limitations of this kind of analysis have been pointed out retrospectively, as a preliminary exercise it has been essential. Even now it remains an important aspect of feminist research.

For instance, in the enthusiastic rush to analyse the widespread process of democratic transition, especially evident in Latin America, through the 1980s, political scientists largely ignored questions about women's participation or the implications of associated institutional and policy changes for women (Waylen 1994). A second generation of feminist researchers has had to take up these basic questions. To take a still more recent example, Lowndes (2000: 533) points out that in the new upsurge of interest in the notion of 'social capital', there has been a 'curious silence ... about gender dynamics', although these could arguably shed considerable light on key issues in the social capital debate.

But in any case this very process of bringing women in has inevitably led feminist political scientists to a third 'stage', in which they raise more fundamental questions about their discipline: about limitations of the characteristic methodologies employed in political science, about the way that politics is conceptualised; and about the 'gendered' character of political institutions and processes. Linking these to broader developments in feminist thinking, I shall look at each of these issues in turn.

Epistemology and methodological issues

Given what has already been said about feminist diversity, there is not one single shared feminist epistemological position. Feminism has been described as going through three epistemological phases: rationalist (positivist), anti-rationalist and post-rationalist (interpretive) (Di Stefano 1990; Squires 1999). Whilst this is up to a point helpful, it is difficult to satisfactorily locate either Marxist feminism or standpoint feminism (to be discussed below) within these categories. Certainly both liberal feminism and early Radical feminism were implicitly rationalist, but without really reflecting upon their own epistemological basis. Marxist feminism inherited the more realist notion of historically circumscribed consciousness. But it is what could be called 'second generation' feminism that has

been much more conscious of this issue. In particular, the post-structuralist turn has depended on a 'post-rationalist' epistemology, which is deeply self-aware, in which indeed in some sense epistemology becomes everything.

In embracing post-structuralism, feminists have adopted a ready-(man-)made epistemological stance. It could be argued that the most distinctively *feminist* epistemological developments have been associated with difference-based feminism. Pro-woman feminists have sometimes represented the world we experience in terms of a series of dualistic oppositions, for instance between culture and nature, or mind and body, identified with men and women respectively. In this process features of 'male' thinking – such as 'rationality' and 'method'- have been rejected not simply as instrumental to male domination but as intrinsically male, with preference given to alternative modes of thought or expression, for instance poetry, that can subvert the patriarchal order and allow a different vision to emerge.

The value of such an uncompromisingly anti-rationalist approach is inevitably limited for feminists working in the social sciences, but there has been an attempt to escape the problem of embedded masculinism through the elaboration of a 'feminist standpoint'. While this endeavour seems to reflect a Radical feminist agenda, its most influential exponent, Nancy Hartsock, has a Marxist feminist background and draws explicitly on Marxist theory. For Hartsock, 'the concept of a standpoint depends on the assumption that epistemology grows in a complex and contradictory way from material life'. Originally she argued, in a way that parallels the Marxist notion of the intellectually 'privileged' vantage point of the urban proletariat, that, within capitalist society at least, the sexual division of labour has meant that all women share a distinctive experience of life, based on their actual or potential role in subsistence and child-rearing. This experience, mediated by feminist political awareness and activism, could provide the basis for a feminist standpoint (Hartsock 1983).

Standpoint theory has been criticised by other feminists on a range of grounds. Inasmuch as consciousness is seen to reflect specific material conditions, this approach has been charged with 'essentialism'. Whilst the theory recognises that experience is not 'innocent', that it needs to be interpreted, this process of interpretation is never adequately spelled out. Finally and perhaps most importantly, it has been accused of failing to take account of the substantial differences *between* women's lives. In response to such criticism, Hartsock has accepted in principle the existence of multiple concrete realities and corresponding perspectives, at the same time becoming less specific about their content (Hartsock 1998; Welton 1997). In a parallel development, there have been attempts to elaborate the contours of a black feminist standpoint (Hill Collins 1991). To the extent

that the standpoint approach has become more fractured and contingent, it could be argued that it has drawn closer to the postmodern position, though significant philosophical differences remain.

This more recent feminist questioning of epistemological foundations has not only found echoes in many areas of feminist scholarship, it has been significantly bound up with the increasing feminist presence within academia. Feminist post-structuralism and standpoint theory have been elaborated and debated in the context of cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, and even history. Within the broad field of political studies, they have also been taken up by political philosophers, such as Hartsock herself. Feminist political scientists, however, have not called into question their discipline's rationalist foundations or embraced these alternative epistemologies in any wholesale way. Rather, they have drawn on them more selectively, in order to problematise specific methodological assumptions and as a source of alternative or supplementary research methods.

While much feminist-inspired political research has accommodated itself to dominant methodologies in political science, some feminist political scientists have been more critical. They have been influenced by wider critiques of positivism and claims for 'objectivity' (the belief that it is possible to separate fact from value), together with their own 'discovery of strong biases in pre-feminist scientific research regarding women's political behaviour' (Carroll and Zerilli 1993: 59). This wariness about the possibility of value-free research has focused in particular on what has arguably been the excessive reliance in the discipline on quantitative analysis of forms of political behaviour, above all of electoral behaviour, which pays insufficient attention to the 'meaning' or context of the 'behaviour' it enumerates (Randall 1991; Lovenduski 1998).

A further example of feminist methodological critique is provided by the sustained criticism of the assumptions underpinning rational choice theory. This critique at the same time illustrates both the diversity and the epistemological development of feminist positions. From a broadly liberal feminist position, Sapiro initially argued that rational choice theory, with its focus on individual calculation of self-interest, presupposed a (male) model of moral free agency. Rather than considering how they were produced, 'The origins and processes of development of individual preferences [were] taken as "givens"' (Sapiro 1979: 13). Instead, the rational choice approach needed to take account of the consequences of oppressive relationships – between classes, or genders – for the decision-making of the oppressed. Sometimes indeed this behaviour was characterised by the oppressors as child-like or irrational, because it did not appear to follow the precepts of rational self-interest. But this was to ignore the effects both of socialisation and of constraining relationships of social dependence.

Diamond and Hartsock, adopting a position closer to cultural feminism, in turn took issue with Sapiro. They suggested that her real mistake was to attempt to work within the conventional categories of political analysis at all. Instead, they argued there were 'commonalities which grow from women's life activity of producing and sustaining human beings, a consequence not just of socialisation but of the biological fact of living in a female body'. Unlike men, for women, therefore, relations with others transcended mere instrumental cooperation for the attainment of joint ends, calling into question the appropriateness of the language of interest to analyse women's political motivations altogether (Diamond and Hartsock 1988)

More recently still, and reflecting the growing interest in post-structural analysis, Pringle and Watson have questioned the conceptualisation of interests as in some sense static and objectively knowable. We should not think of interests as existing 'out there' and able to be simply read off from categories of class, gender, race and so on. Instead we should recognise that instead of underlying interests there are a multiplicity of subject positions: interests should be understood as 'precarious historical products' discursively articulated through the political process itself (Pringle and Watson 1992).

Beyond the critique of specific traditional political science methodologies, there has been a call for more 'feminist methodology', better gauged to reveal and enhance our understanding of the gender dimension of politics (Hawkesworth 1994; Kenney 1996). The characterisation of this methodology, however, tends to be moderate and tentative. There is no sweeping repudiation of rationalist foundations or of a scientific approach in the limited sense of 'being logical and systematic in its method of reasoning' (Randall 1991: 524). It is suggested we should combine different research methods, rather than relying on just one. Anticipating an issue explored more extensively in the next section, we should certainly not confine our analytical toolkit to methods originating in political science but draw eclectically, for instance from the sociology of organisations and ethnography. Above all we should expose the androcentric bias of mainstream political science methods and models and ensure that those we adopt are 'neither gender-biased nor gender-blind' (Hawkesworth 1994: 98).

In summary, although liberal feminism and, to begin with at least, Radical feminism, have been broadly 'rationalist' in their approach, feminist thought, especially within academia, has been increasingly exercised by questions of epistemology. Standpoint feminism represents an attempt to construct a specifically feminist epistemological position, whilst other feminists have espoused the tenets of post-structuralism. Feminist political scientists remain broadly committed to rationalist assumptions

but some have drawn on these feminist epistemological debates to criticise 'positivist' methodologies that inadequately contextualise their findings or draw on masculine behavioural models. Their call for a 'feminist methodology' entails methodological eclecticism, including borrowing methods from outside the discipline, and above all gender awareness.

Reconceptualising politics

Feminism has challenged traditional modes of conceptualising politics, and 'the political', in the discipline. Again we must acknowledge the diversity of feminist positions regarding political participation and the state in theory and in practice. Feminists were divided from the outset over how far to engage with mainstream political institutions. Radical and Marxist feminists tended to depict themselves as revolutionaries and liberal feminists as 'reformist'. In practice all these groupings mounted campaigns directed at the central or local political authorities, and, as discussed further below, over time, Marxist/socialist feminists were increasingly willing to engage in conventional politics. To a large extent in the Western democracies, the reformist perspective won out and at the same time women, including feminists, have made steady inroads into political institutions and the professions. But anxieties about the perils of cooption and de-radicalisation have not entirely disappeared – in Britain, for instance, the advent of the 'New Labour' government in 1997 and election of 120 women MPs sparked them anew.

To an extent these differing approaches to political activism were associated with different conceptions of the political. The real source and inspiration for new thinking was Radical feminism. Liberal feminism for a long time tended to take the existing frame of governing institutions and assumptions on trust, although this is now less true. Marxist feminists, while rejecting the liberal conception, accepted much less critically a Marxist conception of politics that equated it closely with class struggle (see Chapter 7). Radical feminism called into question the conventional understanding of the scope and nature of politics, refusing to endorse its distinction between private and public spheres, and highlighting the ubiquitous role of male power or patriarchy and the masculine character of mainstream political institutions.

To take first the question of the scope of politics, traditionally political science has comprised a number of different approaches, which do not all share an identical conception of its subject matter. One very influential strand of thinking, however, has understood politics primarily as a distinctive kind of activity to do with settling questions of common concern within a community and taking place within the public sphere. Others, including Marxists, have preferred a concept of politics that

associates it more intimately with power – that is, generally, of the 'power over' kind – as in the 'Who gets what, when, where, how?' formula. This notion of politics in principle does not presume a distinct public political arena. However in practice political scientists of all persuasions have overwhelmingly opted to study processes centred in government and surrounding political institutions.

As far as feminist analysis is concerned this definition of politics is much too restrictive. Radical feminism in particular has argued for the broader conception of politics as relationships of power but with the emphasis on power relations between men and women and whenever and wherever they occur – as much, if not more, in the bed or the kitchen, for example, as in Westminster or Whitehall. The approach was summed up, for many, in the slogan 'the personal is political', although recently this distillation has seemed vulnerable to misinterpretation as '*only* the personal is political'.

Feminist political scientists seeking to foreground and explain the underrepresentation of women in the conventional political sphere have been bound to grapple with the question of what we are to mean by politics. Many have argued the need to go beyond more institutional or formal kinds of political participation, to include involvement in social movement networks, community activism and so on – what might now be referred to as 'civil society' (Randall 1987). Some more recently have been attracted by the analytical approach offered by Foucault, which focuses on political 'micro-practices' or the exercise of power and simultaneous resistance at the micro-level of society (Fraser, 1989; Cooper, 1994).

But the question of the scope of politics raises the further issue of the boundaries of political science as a discipline. If, as the feminist critique implies, political science needs to take a much broader view of its subject matter, what does this mean for the relationship between political science and other disciplines? The boundary between political science and sociology appears particularly arbitrary: much of what sociology deals with – family relationships, sexual behaviour, welfare functions – looks pretty political to a feminist. Should political science expand to embrace these aspects of the social or is the problem more fundamentally the way the traditional disciplines have been constructed around male understandings? In practice feminist political scientists have expanded the scope of the discipline, in the sense of the range of subject matter that is considered appropriate for political analysis, and have pointed out the often arbitrary nature of disciplinary boundaries from a gender perspective, though understandably perhaps they do not go so far as to advocate the thoroughly interdisciplinary approach associated with 'women's studies'.

Second, in arguing that politics was ubiquitous, Radical feminism was calling into question the conventional distinction between public and

private spheres. It regarded this distinction simply as an ideological device through which to legitimise the continuing exclusion and oppression of women. Feminists working within the discipline of political science have absorbed this perception to the extent that they have been interested in exploring and demonstrating the close interdependence of public and private spheres. As feminist activists have helped to bring 'private' issues like domestic violence, abortion or childcare on to the public policy agenda, feminist political scientists have undertaken studies of policy-making in these fields. However, they have been more reluctant to abandon the public–private distinction entirely. They see that to the extent that it has shaped social behaviour, it needs to be taken into account. Indeed, without condoning the division, many have found it to have considerable explanatory power. Some feminist political theorists have also argued the need to retain a concept of politics as a public activity through which a community consciously reaches collective decisions, that is, to hold on to its creative potentiality that can be made to work for women as well as for men. And others have pointed out some of the different positive uses or connotations of a concept of privacy for women, for instance, when used to defend women's right to choose whether to use contraception or have an abortion. Phillips (1998) cites this an one example of a wider process of critique followed by 'recuperation', through which feminism has firstly rejected political concepts or ideals because of their association with male power but has subsequently and partially re-appropriated them in recognition of their potential utility or relevance.

But while a feminist perspective does not necessarily require jettisoning the public–private framework, it does suggest the need to approach this framework much more critically. Moller Okin, a 'second generation' liberal feminist, in the sense that she has taken Radical feminist criticisms on board, has provided a particularly effective dissection of the public–private distinction in liberal thinking, noting two major areas of ambiguity. One is the use of public–private to refer both to the distinction between state and society/economy, as in public and private ownership, and to the distinction between state and the family or domestic sphere. In the first, the socio-economic realm is in the private, in the second in the public, sphere. 'There has been little discussion of this major ambiguity by mainstream political theorists' (Moller Okin 1991: 68). The second has resulted from traditional identification of the household with its male head and the consequent failure to recognise that his right to privacy could precisely deny privacy to other household members.

Third, underpinning the Radical feminist critique of conventional understandings of the meaning of politics was the ideologically powerful if undertheorised notion of 'patriarchy' or systematic male dominance.

Patriarchy, while it worked through different levels and agencies – sexuality, physical force, control over reproduction, the church, the state and so forth – had a basic unity which was what called the public–private distinction into question. The Radical feminist notion of patriarchy was taken up more widely and elaborated in different ways. At the same time other feminist strands criticised its tendency to be ahistorical, to disregard cultural differences, to underestimate women's sources of power – and in all these ways to falsely 'universalise' women's experience.

Some feminist academics have sought to impart greater rigour and specificity. Pateman (1983) traced the changing articulation of patriarchy in normative political theory, from a traditional form of authority based on the rights of the patriarchal family head into a 'sexual contract' subordinating women that remained the unacknowledged premise of the modern 'fraternal' contract between men. Both she and Walby (1990) identified a gradual shift in Western society from private patriarchy, based on men's power within the home, to public patriarchy in which women had exchanged dependence on their menfolk for dependence on the state, as employer, welfare provider and so on. Such ideas have been taken further in feminist analyses of the state, and specifically the welfare state, discussed below.

Finally, along with the concept of patriarchy, Radical feminism promoted a view of politics, at least public politics, as intrinsically male: competitive, hierarchical, aggressive, and exclusively concerned with the furtherance of male interests. Feminist political scientists have generally been less inclined to accept such a determinist view. A number who have been influenced by ideas derived from cultural feminism have, however, been interested in exploring the possibility that there either is or could be an alternative women's way of doing and thinking about politics, as in the idea of a distinct 'women's culture'. In a much-cited study, the feminist psychologist, Carole Gilligan, suggested on the basis of her own research findings that women tended to reason about moral questions in 'a different voice'. Where men focused on interests and more abstract rights and rules, associated with an ethic of justice, women, because of their greater involvement in personal relationships and caring responsibilities, were more likely to espouse an 'ethic of care' (Gilligan 1982). This helped to generate interest in the existence and potential contribution of a distinct 'ethic of care' that women could bring to public political life, as developed in particular by the feminist political theorist, Joan Tronto (1993), although Tronto has been anxious to emphasise both that such an ethic reflects not so much a female standpoint as a more generalised experience of subordination and that the ethic of care should be seen as supplementing rather than replacing established notions of justice.

To give a recent example, Mackay's analysis of the views and experiences of Scottish women councillors expressly examines how far they speak in a 'different voice' about care, as a burden and as a value. She draws in particular on Tronto's notion of a 'vocabulary of care', or the language in which care-related issues could be articulated in order to reveal the real distribution of caring responsibilities and the way that care-giving is devalued and obscured. In her interviews with 53 women councillors, she found that

> Caring responsibilities were recognized by women politicians to constitute a disadvantage and constraint; conversely, caring was understood to be a source of strength and value. There was seen to be a need to place what Tronto has characterized as an 'ethic of care' centrally in political and social life ... However, there was a struggle to see this as a wholly legitimate political issue; and uncertainty as to how an 'ethic of care' might be introduced into current political systems.
> (Mackay 1998: 265; see also Mackay 2001).

Summarising once more, feminism, and most notably Radical feminism, entails a major critique of conventional understandings of the scope and character of politics: it rejects the public–private distinction as ideology, discerns an underlying system of patriarchy and condemns the masculinism of public politics. Feminist political scientists have been strongly influenced by these arguments even whilst applying their insights more cautiously and critically. They have challenged assumptions about the scope and disciplinary boundaries of political science; they have simultaneously questioned the public–private dichotomy and used it as a valuable analytical tool; and whilst not automatically endorsing them, they have taken up notions of patriarchy and the masculinity of mainstream politics as hypotheses to investigate or elaborate empirically.

Gendering the state

But whilst feminist political scientists have criticised the discipline's traditional concentration on mainstream political institutions and argued the need to expand conceptions of the political, they have also, and perhaps increasingly, devoted attention themselves to a gendered analysis of these very same institutions, or the 'state'. To begin with, Marxist and Radical feminists, both drawing strongly on traditional 'leftist' thinking, absorbed the concept of the 'state' quite comfortably and uncritically into their perspectives. Although, as earlier described, the state was regarded with deep suspicion, as an agent of capitalism and/or patriarchy, there was also felt to be a need for a distinctive and systematic feminist theory of

the state. Perhaps unsurprisingly, feminism ultimately failed to produce such a theory.

It was less an issue for liberal feminism which tended to accept the system of government as given if not necessarily ideal, but implicitly assumed a liberal democratic model. For early Radical feminists the state was simply a site and instrument of patriarchy, not necessarily the most important. To begin with, Marxist feminism offered a similarly functional account of the state's role in maintaining capitalism. As it sought increasingly to 'marry' class and gender analyses, the state was identified as the possible site where these two systems were reconciled (Eisenstein 1979). In the 1980s the Marxist, or socialist, feminist account of the state became more sophisticated and less determinist. Intellectually it drew on developments in Marxist theory allowing the capitalist state a degree of 'relative autonomy' from capitalism and recognising that rather than being monolithic the state consisted of multiple arenas in which political struggles could be waged. Such ideas were attractive because they sanctioned a more instrumentalist view of the state, thereby helping to legitimise socialist feminists' growing involvement in mainstream political institutions. However, the Marxist feminist conception of the state did not add much to Marxist theory and certainly did not incorporate gender in any particularly original way. Many of its exponents were subsequently drawn to more Foucauldian understandings of the circulation of power in which the contours of the state as such become extremely hazy.

These days we are less inclined to ask of a political ideology or perspective that it deliver something as categorical as a 'theory of the state'. It was never, in any case, all that clear what such a theory should entail. One of the implications of the notion of patriarchy is that the distinction between the state and society is formal rather than substantive, suggesting that the state is not necessarily a very revealing focus of analysis. On the other hand, Judith Allen (1990) argued that state theories were pitched at too abstract and general a level to be of much relevance for feminists who *were* engaging more extensively with state institutions, leading her to ask whether feminism actually needs a theory of the state.

But while there may not be a 'grand' theory, feminist thinkers have increasingly grappled with both the constitutive and the more normative questions raised by women's engagement with specific political institutions, processes and policies. To that extent, as Connell has argued, they have helped to develop aspects of an implicit feminist view of the state. Connell, who provides perhaps the best account to date of this question, draws on the literature to offer his own synthesis, which is more a framework for a theory than a theory but very useful none the less. He uses the term 'gender regime' to describe how the state embodies a set of power relationships between men and women, which is itself the

precipitate of its earlier gender history. The gender regime operates through hierarchy, the division of labour and the structure of cathexis, or emotional attachment. Embodying gender in this way, the state is both impelled and enabled to regulate gender relations in society, thereby actually helping to reconstitute the categories being regulated and is thus 'involved in the historical process generating and transforming the basic components of the gender order' (Connell 1990: 529).

Feminist social scientists have also contributed significantly to analyses of the Western 'welfare state'. They have debated amongst themselves how far particular welfare states are best seen as instances of 'public patriarchy' or as 'woman-friendly'. They have criticised the influential typology of welfare states propounded by Esping-Anderson (1990) for its neglect of gender questions, one suggestion being the need to consider how far social and economic policies have been predicated on a 'male breadwinner' model (for an overview of these debates see Lewis 1997). And they have assessed the implications for women as employees and as mothers of the ongoing process of welfare state restructuring.

But there has also been a growing interest amongst feminist political scientists in providing a *gendered* account of particular political institutions. This is seen as the field of inquiry that follows on logically from the earlier questions about why women were politically underrepresented and what difference women's participation could make. Now the emphasis is on the features of the institutional context that help to explain and shape women's participation, and which might indicate feminist strategy.

Earlier I made reference to a shift in feminist thinking from sex categories to the notion of gender, in which the socially constructed character of gender roles and identities was emphasised. Postmodernist feminists, we saw, have subsequently queried the simple opposition of (given) sex and (socially constructed) gender, and even without this step the concept of gender is hardly straightforward: both actual and potential usage admit of infinite variation (Carver 1998). Nonetheless, as Lovenduski describes, feminist political scientists who experienced 'growing dissatisfaction with the analytical utility of the concept of sex' have taken up gender as an organising term. Amongst the advantages of separating sex and gender is that it 'exposes the different meanings of gender according to class, race, history, and so forth, unmasking differences among women and allowing new ways of dealing with questions about difference'. It also means that as feminist political scientists have become interested in analysing the impact of women's growing presence in different institutional arenas, as in for instance the role of the 'femocrats' or feminist bureaucrats – a term first coined in Australia – they have a language in which to discuss what 'else' changes when numbers of women do (Lovenduski 1998: 338).

When institutions are described as 'gendered' it means, in Acker's words, that:

> advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes. (Acker 1990: 146)

An influential early collection of essays that helped to establish this approach was edited by Savage and Witz (1992). Illustrating how arbitrary disciplinary boundaries can often seem when dealing with gender issues, it ranges over many different forms of bureaucracy, not all of them governmental, and draws heavily on the sociology of organisations. But in addition to the editors' valuable overview of the field, Halford provides an excellent illustration of the gendered analysis of political institutions in her study of the difficulties encountered by 'women's initiatives' (as promoted by women's committees, women's officers and so forth) in British local government authorities.

Acknowledging that local government tends to be resistant to any change, Halford argues that women's initiatives have faced special obstacles because of the gendered dynamic of local government structures and cultures. She draws on case studies of ten local authorities, combining a variety of research methods to suggest some of the ways this dynamic operates. For instance, at the level of individual council actors, it is necessary to consider the implications of proposed changes for their 'personal agendas', not simply their occupational and career concerns but their 'extra-mural' interests and assumptions, including their views of the domestic division of labour. She also considers the three main organisational forms through which male interests tend to be represented in local government – trade unions, professions and the senior managers' group – and the circumstances under which they are most likely to prove resistant to change. She notes for instance that the chief officers' meeting is at the core of senior management but in 1985 there were only 50 women chief officers in the whole of the UK (Halford 1992).

A second example of this gendered institutions approach is Kathlene's much cited study (1995) of gender power dynamics in US state legislative committees. Kathlene is disputing the widespread assumption that increasing the number of women elected to public office will automatically increase their influence within legislative arenas. In the USA for state legislators, individual influence over the policy-making process lies mainly in committees and subcommittees. If legislative committees are genuinely gender-neutral, she suggests, female committee chairs should have the same opportunities to influence the legislative process as male chairs. And,

similarly, if there is a sufficient proportion or 'critical mass' of women committee members, 'the effects of tokenism and maginalization should be eliminated, allowing women to join freely in the debate on bills' (1995: 168). On the other hand, and illustrating the readiness of many feminist political scientists to draw on research methods and findings outside the narrowly defined sphere of political science, Kathlene cites analysis of women's experience in the workplace which indicates that 'sexism rather than group size produces inequities ... and highly masculinized occupations become more, not less, resistant to rapidly increasing numbers of women' (1995: 167).

Kathlene explores this question through an examination of the verbal dynamics of committee hearings. During 1989 a series of committee hearings were taped in the lower house of the state legislature of Colorado, where the proportion of women representatives at 33 per cent was relatively high. Kathlene uses these data to analyse the verbal interventions of the different participants – chairs, members and witnesses – looking at such aspects as the percentage of time that had elapsed at the point when the speaker entered the discussion, the frequency of words spoken and turns taken and the percentage of interruptions made and received. The actual findings of her study are complex. Position does make a difference: for instance, men and women chairs acted more like each other than their male and female counterparts in other positional roles. But sex is also unmistakeably significant. Thus women chairing committees spoke less, took fewer turns and made fewer interruptions than corresponding male chairs. Sex was likewise a powerful predictor of verbal participation in hearings by committee members. Participation by members and witnesses was often affected by whether the chair was a man or a woman: for instance, under a female chair, male witnesses demonstrated increased verbal aggressiveness, even interrupting the chair.

Besides analysing verbal behaviour statistically, Kathlene considers modes of address. She observes that

> A woman who testified was usually addressed by her first name by male chair persons, whether she was an unknown expert or citizen or a familiar lobbyist or bureaucrat; but a witness who was a man received a title in front of his name, both at the time of introduction and at the conclusion of his remarks ... The most egregious example of this sexist treatment occurred in a hearing on a health issue where several doctors testified. Although the woman witness clearly stated her title and name as 'Dr Elisa Jones' [author: this is a fictitious name], the male chairperson addressed her repeatedly as 'Elisa' and finally thanked 'Mrs Jones' for her testimony. Needless to say, none of the male doctors were referred to as anything but 'Dr, Surname'. (1995: 180)

She also goes beyond verbal behaviour to look at the impact of seating arrangements, finding that where these enabled women to sit closer to other women, they could have a positive impact on women members' interventions. Overall Kathlene's study is a fine illustration of the potential of gendered institutional analysis, where it is imaginatively devised and carefully undertaken, to reveal the powerful if complex gender dynamics at work within formally gender-neutral political institutions.

Critical responses to feminist political science

The way a feminist perspective has been applied in political science has been criticised from a number of different vantage points (here I am focusing on feminist political science rather than feminism *per se*, since I have been arguing that they are by no means the same thing).

Universalism

In the first place, since the diversity of viewpoints *within* feminism has to an extent been mirrored or incorporated in feminist political studies, some of the criticisms consist of forms of argument internal to the feminist enterprise itself. So earlier feminist political science has been criticised, at least implicitly, for too 'universalistic' a conception of woman, that insufficiently recognised the diversity amongst women, the fact indeed that there could be profound conflicts of interest and perception between groups of women.

Essentialism

Closely related has been the charge of 'essentialism', although, as Squires discusses, in feminist theory this term is 'much overused and very confused' (Squires 1999: 66). Those favouring a social constructionist account of identity tended to equate essentialism with biological determinism but they have been criticised by post-structuralists in turn for a kind of residual essentialism constituted at the material or symbolic level. Within the canon, 'essentialism remains a term still uttered in a tone of contempt' (Quinby, cited by Squires 1999: 67). This raises the question to be returned to in the final section of how far, so long as we are feminists, we either can or should want to escape all hint of essentialist thinking.

Uncritical

But it has been noted that feminist thinking as a whole and, most significantly, women's studies and feminism within other disciplines have

shown little interest in or approval for feminist political science (Sapiro 1998). This suggests a second line of criticism, that could be made from a feminist perspective, which is that feminist political science has not been bold enough. It has not pursued the feminist analysis of politics to its most radical conclusions. In practice, certainly whilst feminist political science was establishing itself, there was a tendency, as we have seen, to adopt fairly uncritically traditional 'male' methods, especially quantitative analysis of aspects of political behaviour, that were considered the most rigorous and 'scientific' and that accorded highest status to the user. One reason for this may be that women have played, and continue to play, a relatively marginal role in the political science profession and have experienced difficulty in their search for 'academic validation' (Lovenduski 1998: 351) and career progression.

Restrictive

Related to this is the criticism that whilst feminist political science has raised important questions about the relationship between private and public political spheres, as these affect participation, policy-making and content, and so forth, in practice it has concentrated its attention too narrowly on that sphere or level of activity conventionally equated with the political. By the same token it has not sufficiently challenged the traditional boundaries between political studies and cognate disciplines, although, as I have described, feminist political scientists have been increasingly willing to make use of frameworks and methods drawn from other discipline areas. Up to a point, of course, this is again explicable in terms of the difficulties women political scientists face in establishing themselves within the discipline. As Kenney suggests, 'the discipline values more highly work that addresses central or fundamental questions of the subfields rather than asks new ones or crosses subfields or disciplines' (Kenney 1996: 447). So long as the existing disciplinary compartmentalisation of training and research remains, moving too far out from its traditional core region must pose a threat to the identity of political science and its claims to expertise. Unfortunately the traditional parameters of political science reflect a strongly masculine experience and concept of politics, which tends to cut across the 'wide-angle lens' (Carroll and Zerilli 1993: 60) that is needed to give a fully gendered account.

Ineffective

But if feminist political science has been criticised for its timid or partial incorporation of feminist insights, perhaps its main 'failing' has been in

bringing about significant change in the mainstream discipline. Political science, unlike sociology, say, or history, remains remarkably undented by the feminist perspective. This is true in Britain but even in the United States, 'despite the size of the gender politics community, and despite the fact that most political science departments now offer at least one course in the area, gender politics has not been fully integrated into political science; its theories, questions and conclusion have not been "mainstreamed" to any significant degree' (Sapiro 1998: 68). As already emphasised, political science remains a very 'male-dominated' profession. But in addition its core subject matter, the world of 'high politics', remains stubbornly masculine. As Phillips writes, 'feminism has been less successful in challenging "malestream" politics than in the near-revolution it has achieved elsewhere. We are living through a time of major transformation in sexual relations ... In politics, by contrast, it still seems like business as usual' (Phillips 1998: 1).

Conclusion: the way forward

Squires summarises the feminist impulse as 'a political position aiming to alter the power balance between men and women in favour of women, complicated by the perception that there are power balances between women and that the category of women may itself be a product of patriarchal relations' (Squires 1999: 76–7). Despite its internal diversity and debates, the feminist perspective is badly needed in political science. The achievements of feminist political science in ensuring a full and discerning account of women as political actors have been substantial and whilst the limitations of this approach are increasingly recognised, it will go on being necessary. Feminist political science has also raised more fundamental questions about the way that politics is conceptualised, including the conventional distinction between public and private, and the implications for the scope and boundaries of political science as a discipline. The most recent trend is back towards a focus on political institutions but informed now by a more sophisticated conception of the complex ways they are constituted and operate, in order to demonstrate and explore their gendered character. Though the impact of feminism on the discipline remains marginal, as do women in the profession and in most arenas of 'high politics', as Phillips (1998) points out, there can be some intellectual advantages or opportunities to be found in marginality. The ambiguous position of feminist political scientists questioning central elements of an established discipline both enables and encourages them to look 'outside' for perspectives and a language in which to construct and express an alternative viewpoint.

As, over time, the way in which feminism formulates its central problem has been continuously contested and revised, feminist political science has also, if gradually, had to re-articulate its agenda of inquiry. The universalised and unified concept of 'woman', originally defined in terms of its power relationship to 'man', has been increasingly called into question, to the point where it is really very difficult if not impossible to retrieve it from the days of political, and philosophical, innocence. Even so, there is no reason, it seems to me, to let go entirely of the idea that there may be differences between men and women that are relevant in particular political contexts. For instance, while not all women bear children or even want to, men (for the moment!) cannot (Phillips 1995). Many post-structuralist feminists are willing to entertain the notion of 'contingent femininity' (Coole 1990) or some other form of 'strategic essentialism' (Nash 1994). But in the move to 'gender' is also entailed a more systematic investigation of the masculinity of politics and political institutions. Of course, just as we have been compelled to recognise the diversity not just of women but of femininities, so we must acknowledge that there is not one single form of masculinity. In the future, feminist political science will need to engage more fully with questions surrounding the formation of masculinities, reflected in a growing body of literature and research, without losing hold of its original political commitment to women.

Further reading

In addition to some key articles indicated in the text, the following books may be of value in following up aspects of the topics covered here:

- Bryson (1999) provides a highly accessible introduction to developing debates within feminism.
- Squires (1999) is a more demanding text that analyses these debates in the context of feminist political theory.
- Some of the questions about conceptions of 'the political' and of politics are taken up in Jones and Jonasdottir (1988), while MacKay (2001) uses a case study to explore further the notion of 'an ethic of care'.
- In different ways Connell (1987), Phillips (1991) and Savage and Witz (1992) illustrate and take further interest in a feminist analysis of the state and political institutions. Waylen (1996) thoughtfully explores many of these issues in a 'Third World' context. Both Phillips (1998) and Randall and Waylen (1998) are useful recent edited collections.
- To the extent that we now need to be looking more critically at assumptions about masculinity, Connell (1995) is an excellent starting point.

Chapter 6

Interpretive Theory

MARK BEVIR AND R.A.W. RHODES

Interpretive approaches to political studies focus on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so. Epistemology poses the question of 'how do we know what we know about political science?' (see Chapter 1). Interpretive theories constitute one set of answers to that question. Behind the different types of interpretive theory, there lies the shared assumption that we cannot understand human affairs properly unless we grasp the relevant meanings. Different varieties of interpretive theory understand meanings in different ways. They can be expressions of, for example, reason, intentions, beliefs, the unconscious or a system of signs. They also explain meanings in different ways using such notions as logical progression, the dispositions of individuals, and the structural links between concepts and power. In short, interpretive approaches study beliefs, ideas or discourses. As important, they study beliefs as they perform within, and even frame, actions, practices and institutions. Interpretive theory applies to all of political studies.

The inevitability of interpretation can be shown easily by the following example. In October 1943, the Danes rescued 7,200 Jews by taking them in small boats across the Øresund which separated Nazi-occupied Denmark from neutral Sweden. These widely shared 'facts' lie at the heart of a heated debate. According to the 'Heroic Danes' theory, the brave Danes at risk of life and liberty rescued the Danish Jews from the murderous Nazis. Others try to demythologise Danish actions. According to the 'Good Germans' theory the deportation was set up by the top brass of the Nazi regime but sabotaged by brave local Germans influenced by Denmark's democratic way of life. Finally, according to the 'Berlin' theory, Hitler's orders to remove the Danes from Denmark were interpreted creatively with Himmler's knowledge and approval. He was the most loyal of Hitler's top Nazis who cannot be suspected of frustrating Hitler's policy. So, the Danes did what the Nazis wanted. The arguments rage from how much the fishermen charged the Jews to take them to Sweden to whether the documentation supports the view that Berlin approved the policy.

Repeatedly, the debate revolves around the motives of key actors and is hampered only in part by inadequate source material. It is widely agreed that the Danes took many Jews to Sweden but it is less clear what these agreed 'facts' mean (for a summary see Kirchhoff 1995; Paulsson 1995; and their citations).

Political science has its origins in such disciplines as history, law and philosophy where interpretation often plays a dominant role. Historians focused on particular events as they unfolded chronologically. They sought to unpack the beliefs and motives of those involved in their story. Lawyers looked at the formal nature of institutions. They sought to unearth the intentions of law-makers to decide how to apply the law. Philosophers explored the normative side of social life. They sought to discover the ideals by which others had lived as a guide to how we should do so. Alongside these varieties of political studies, there also arose approaches more defiantly indebted to the natural sciences which tried to find laws or regularities that governed social life irrespective of the beliefs of individuals or the meanings found in a society.

After the Second World War political studies witnessed the emergence and gradual preeminence of behaviouralism, structuralism and, most recently, rational choice theory, all of which embody scientific ambitions. Present-day interpretive theory thus has two main strands. First, there are the interpretive approaches rooted in the humanities, notably history. They draw on hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophies which seek to understand the meanings people attach to social action. Second, new approaches to interpretive theory flourished as disillusionment with the scientific aims of behaviouralism and structuralism grew. These approaches draw on post-structuralist and postmodern philosophies.

This chapter has four sections. The first section explains why students of politics will find interpretive approaches useful. The second identifies some of the main varieties of interpretation, as well as exploring some of the issues that divide them. The third shows how our approach to interpretive theory can be used to explore empirical issues, for example, Thatcherism. The final section assesses the main criticisms levelled at interpretive approaches to political studies.

The importance of interpretation

An interpretive approach follows from two premises.

The first straightforward premise is that people act on their beliefs and preferences. People vote for the Labour Party, for example, because they

share its values, or they believe its policies will improve their well-being. Similarly, when politicians raise interest rates they do so because they think that by doing so they will prevent inflation, or they believe doing so will get them a reputation for financial prudence, or they want to save money for a pre-election binge. Because people act on beliefs and preferences, it is possible to explain their actions by referring to the relevant beliefs and preferences. Few political scientists would deny that such explanations have some force. Yet many would complain that such explanations lack the power of general applicability, and anyway that beliefs and preferences are impossible to corroborate. So, they seek to bypass beliefs by correlating actions with objective facts about people: for example, correlating voting and class. Alternatively they seek to build models on basic assumptions about the rationality of human actors: they might suggest, for example, that rational people will raise interest rates when inflation increases.

So, the second premise common to interpretive approaches is that we cannot read off people's beliefs and preferences from objective facts about them such as their social class, race, or institutional position. The impossibility of pure experiences implies that we cannot reduce beliefs and preferences to mere intervening variables. When we say that a top official managing the Department of Administrative Affairs has an interest in preserving the staffing and spending levels of his department, we necessarily bring our particular theories to bear to identify his position and deduce what interests go with it. People with different theories might believe that this top civil servant is in a different position. He is not a manager but rather a political and policy adviser and so has different interests – for example, protecting the minister from political flak and firefighting policy disasters. Or we may argue that top officials have different interests: for example, launching and promoting the department's long-standing policy preferences. Indeed, our theories may lead us to views contrary to a person's own view of their position and its associated interests. For example, some working-class voters might consider themselves to be middle-class with an interest in preventing further redistributive measures. Others might consider themselves to be working-class while believing redistributive measures are contrary to the true interests of the workers because they delay the revolution.

These two premises are all we need to show that interpretation is important. However, there are reasons for insisting on a special role for interpretation in spelling out some features of social life. One obvious area is ideology, which political actors use to legitimate their actions irrespective of their real motivations. When politicians use human rights to justify

a policy, we cannot understand that justification and its effectiveness, irrespective of its truth, unless we grasp the content and role of ideas about human rights in the relevant society.

Much the same is true of a final area where interpretation plays a key role: that is, in analysing the ideas and language conventions which underpin social practices (Koselleck 1998; Richter 1995). When a priest pronounces a couple married, for example, they become married only because of settled conventions about the legal authority of the church, the religious nature of marriage and the binding power of contracts. To understand and explain what happens at such times, we have to grasp the relevant conventions and beliefs. A marriage can be neither contracted nor conducted without a structure of meanings stemming from theology, law, morality and custom. We can study the statistical rises and falls in the number of marriages only after we are able to take for granted a whole series of interpretations.

The arguments for the ineluctable role of interpretation are closely tied to arguments against the possibility of a science of politics. People act on their beliefs and preferences but we do not have external evidence of those beliefs. So, when we try to explain the link between beliefs and actions, there is no causal necessity to that link equivalent to the explanations found in the natural sciences. However, we can still explain social action: we can do so by pointing to the conditional and volitional links between beliefs, desires, intentions and actions. Political studies thus rely on a narrative form of explanation (Bevir 1999a). We account for actions, practices and institutions by telling a story about how they came to be as they are and perhaps also about how they are preserved. Narratives are thus to political studies what theories are to the natural sciences. Although narratives may have a chronological order and contain such elements as setting, character, actions and events, their defining characteristic is that they explain actions using beliefs and preferences. So, studying politics relies on narrative structures akin to those found in works of fiction. However, the stories told by the human sciences are not works of fiction. The difference between the two lies not in the use of narrative, but in the link between narrative structures and our objective knowledge of the world.

Varieties of interpretation

Interpretive approaches often begin from the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the meanings, the beliefs and preferences, of the people involved. The emphasis is not new in

political studies. John Stuart Mill (1969 [1840]: 119–20) remarked:

> By Bentham ... men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? And by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? The one took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it ... Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries ... With Coleridge ... the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved, was one of the phenomena to be accounted for.

As political studies developed, however, and separated from other disciplines, the concern with meaning became associated with hermeneutics and ethnology. More recently, post-structuralist and postmodern philosophies have inspired other varieties of interpretation. The latter two forms of interpretation shift our focus from individuals and mind to systems of signs and how they work in society. We provide a brief outline of these approaches.

Hermeneutics and ethnology

In the early part of the twentieth century, an analytical and atomistic form of positivism increasingly dominated Anglo-American philosophy. Typically this positivism helped to inspire a behaviourist social science with little interest in beliefs or meanings. Philosophers who inherited the idealist mantle of the late nineteenth century, and those who turned to continental traditions such as phenomenology provided the main alternatives to positivism. Idealists such as Michael Oakeshott and R. G. Collingwood favoured hermeneutic approaches to history and by extension to the human sciences as a whole. Phenomenology inspired sociologists and anthropologists who wanted to understand the meanings people attach to social action in their own or other societies. It resulted in the ethnology of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman and Clifford Geertz. To explain hermeneutics and phenomenology, we provide a brief definition followed by a longer example.

Hermeneutics emerged within biblical scholarship. It has come, however, to refer to the theory of understanding, especially interpreting texts and actions (Bauman 1978; Gadamer 1979). So, it overlaps with an interest in the history of ideas (as in the examples of Collingwood 1993 and Oakeshott 1962, 1975). Typically hermeneutic theorists explore the existential nature of understanding while recognising it is embedded in

tradition. So to give specific examples, Collingwood argued that all history was 'thought', where thought was a series of answers to specific questions arising in a historically specific set of taken-for-granted ideas. Oakeshott insisted, against rationalists and positivists, that political knowledge could come only from history. Political activity should be explained by the wisdom and moral claims in the relevant tradition of behaviour. W. H. Greenleaf's (1983–87) grand vision of British politics in the twentieth century represents a self-conscious application of Oakeshott's hermeneutic theory. Greenleaf traces the rise of collectivism, the ideological tensions that then surrounded the growth of government and the impact of such growth on the political system. He moves outwards from the intimations of a tradition to the practices and institutions it produces.

Edmund Husserl, the originator of phenomenological philosophy, argued that the life world of everyday common sense provides the basis of any possible experience (Husserl 1931). Later theorists suggested our common-sense knowledge was always incomplete and variable. We only ever hold such knowledge provisionally. Contingent social processes produce it. So, ethnology focuses on different forms of common-sense knowledge and practical reasoning that occur in diverse social contexts. It has appealed mainly to sociologists and cultural anthropologists and to expand on this brief definition we outline the work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (see also Berger and Luckman 1971).

For Clifford Geertz (1973), humans are suspended in the webs of significance they have spun. Anthropologists practise ethnology to discover the relevant weaves of meaning. Doing ethnography involves such techniques as selecting informants, transcribing texts and keeping field notes. More important, it is about 'thick descriptions'; about explicating 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (all quotes in this summary are from Geertz 1973: Chapter 1). The everyday phrase is 'seeing things from the other's point of view'. Ethnographers provide their own interpretations of what the informants are up to and these accounts are second- or even third-order interpretations.

Ethnographic description has four main characteristics: it is interpretive; it interprets the flow of social discourse; it inscribes that discourse by writing it down; and it is microscopic. It is a soft science. It guesses at meanings, assesses the guesses and draws explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. However, it is still possible to generalise. Theory provides a vocabulary with which to express what symbolic action has to say. It is not about prediction. Theory has to 'generate cogent interpretations of realities past; it has to survive realities to come'. If experimental sciences are about description and explanation, then ethnography is about

inscription (or 'thick descriptions') and specification (or clinical diagnosis). So, the task is to set down the meanings that particular actions have for social actors and then say what these thick descriptions tells us about the society in which they are found. And this analysis is always incomplete.

> An Englishman (in India) who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked ... what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? 'Ah Sahib [sic], after that it is turtles all the way down.'

The ethnographer will never get to the bottom of anything. So ethnography is a science 'marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other.'

Post-structuralism and postmodernism

Interpretive approaches indebted to hermeneutics and ethnology persisted even during the heyday of positivism. More recently, post-structuralist and postmodern philosophies have resulted in new varieties of interpretive theory. While these new approaches provide powerful challenges to the scientific hopes of behaviourists and rational choice theorists, proponents of hermeneutic and ethnographic alternatives have not always welcomed them. The labels 'post-structuralist' and 'postmodernist' refer to a broad range of theorists who challenge foundationalism in philosophy and the human sciences. They include Jacques Derrida (1976), Michel Foucault (1977, 1986), Jacques Lacan (1977), Jean-François Lyotard (1984), Richard Rorty (1980) and Hayden White (1973, 1987). Unfortunately, the clear differences among them make these labels singularly unhelpful. Many of the theorists involved have renounced the labels for their own work. So, here we can only try to give the reader a feel for the interpretive theories inspired by post-structuralism and postmodernism rather than providing authoritative definitions. We do so by looking more closely at the work of Foucault.

Like most post-structuralists and postmodernists, Foucault is implacably hostile to the grandiose claims that characterise the so-called modern project. This project claims to ground our knowledge and ethics on objective and essential foundations. Typically it does so by appealing to either pure experience of the world or the pure nature of human subjectivity. In doing so, it relies on other positions about, say, the

transparent nature of language and the progressive nature of human history. The question of how accurate it is to equate modernity with such claims and positions need not concern us here. Rather, we are concerned with post-structuralists' and postmodernists' analyses of the necessary limits of this modern project. Foucault's work displays a continuing hostility to two modern concepts: the subject and reason (Bevir 1999b).

Foucault's hostility to the modern project leads him to adopt an interpretive approach to social life. In opposing pure experiences, he suggests we have experiences only within a prior discourse. Objects and actions acquire meaning, become 'real', only when they have a place in a language, a wider web of meanings. So, to understand an object or action, students of politics have to interpret it in the wider discourse of which it is a part. Human life is understandable only in an episteme or framework of meaning and this framework of meaning cannot be reduced to an objective process or structure. Discourse cannot be dismissed as a passive reflection of social or economic forces: social class or the means of production do not determine it. However, Foucault does not credit a significant role to human agency in constructing such discourses. Rather, he suggests they develop randomly as products of time and chance. There are no cosmic logics, no great impersonal forces of history, which allow us to read off a discourse from our knowledge of that logic or history. Students of politics have to interpret objects and actions in their historically specific circumstances.

In his early writings, Foucault sometimes argued that an episteme structured the particular meanings or objects of a given era (Foucault 1973, 1986). Even here, however, meanings were not fixed. The episteme only limited the particular meanings found in it. In his later work, moreover, Foucault turned from the notion of an episteme to that of a discursive practice (1972). A discourse consists of endlessly multiplying meanings, many statements and events, none of which is stable, none of which makes up an essence. From a post-structuralist perspective, the key to understanding a social practice is not its formal legal character – for example, the law on marriage and sexual conduct – or the objective characteristics of those involved – for example, an individual's educational and occupational background. Rather, these characteristics, like the practice itself, can only be understood as part of the cluster of meanings that make them possible. For example, Foucault argues that the modern state gets its character from the way in which it brings together the concepts of sovereignty, discipline and pastorship (Foucault 1991).

The distinct nature of Foucault's interpretive approach owes much to his hostility to the subject and reason. For a start, his hostility to the subject means he stresses the ways in which regimes of power and epistemes construct individuals and their beliefs. Foucault rejected the

idea of an autonomous subject: that is, the subject did not have its own foundation or meaningful experiences, reasoning, beliefs and actions outside a social context. Equally, he rejected the Hegelian and Marxist vision of history as realising the subject. For Foucault, the subject is a contingent product of a particular discourse, a particular set of techniques of government and technologies of the self (Foucault 1982). So, he stresses discourses rather than beliefs. In addition, Foucault's hostility to reason means he decentres discourses to show how they arise out of the more or less random interactions of all sorts of micro-practices (Foucault, 1978–85). In his later works, he rejected the notion of structural relationships, essential characteristics, or a logical development governing social practices. The modern state, for example, arose by adapting various techniques – such as the pastoral power of the church – which clearly are not integral to the state (Foucault 1991).

An anti-foundational approach to interpretation

In this section we outline our approach. We start by showing how our approach relates to other varieties of interpretation under the general headings of subjectivity, rationality and relativism. We then provide an example of this approach 'in action' by exploring varieties of Thatcherism.

Subjectivity

Post-structuralist and postmodern varieties of interpretation differ from hermeneutic ones principally because of their hostility to subjectivity and rationality. We favour a form of interpretation that lies between hermeneutics and post-structuralism. Critics often view post-structuralism and postmodernism as marking a total break with the modern ideas of the subject and truth: that is, with a nihilistic irrationalism (Bloom 1987; Habermas 1987). Foucault and others sometimes lend credence to this view, though they are better understood as attacking autonomy and foundational notions of truth without spending enough time spelling out where that leaves us. We are neither nihilistic nor irrational. We will defend, first, the possibility of agency even without autonomy, and, second, an anthropological concept of objectivity based on criteria of comparison (Bevir 1999a).

Some interpretive theories assume autonomous subjects who think and act according solely to their own reason and commands. Post-structuralists and postmodernists oppose such an idea. However, a rejection of autonomy need not entail a rejection of agency. To deny that subjects can escape from all social influences is not to deny that they can act creatively for

reasons that make sense to them. On the contrary, we must allow for agency if only because we cannot separate and distinguish beliefs and actions by reference to their social context alone. Different people adopt different beliefs and perform different actions against the background of the same social structure. So, there must be a space in social structures where individual subjects decide what beliefs to hold and what actions to perform for their own reasons. Individuals can reason creatively in ways that are not fixed or limited by the social contexts or discourses in which they exist. We agree with the post-structuralists and postmodernists that subjects experience the world in ways that necessarily depend on the influence of social structures on them. Nonetheless, we still must allow that the subject has the ability to select particular beliefs and actions, including novel ones, which might transform the relevant social structure. This view of agency suggests we see social structures not as epistemes, languages or discourses, but as traditions. The concepts of episteme, language and discourse typically imply social structures that fix individual acts and exist independently of these acts. By contrast, the notion of tradition implies that the relevant social structure is one in which the subjects are born, which then acts as the background to their later beliefs and actions without fixing them. 'Tradition' allows for the possibility of subjects adapting, developing, and perhaps even rejecting, much of their heritage.

We view a tradition as a set of theories or narratives, and associated practices that people inherit, and forms the background against which they reach beliefs and perform actions. Traditions are contingent, constantly evolving and necessarily located in a historical context. They are handed on from generation to generation, whether from parent to child in families or elder to apprentice in organisations and networks. Traditions must be composed of beliefs and practices relayed from teacher to pupil and so on. Moreover, traditions are not fixed or static, so we can only identify the particular instances that compose any given tradition by tracing the appropriate historical connections back through time.

Rationality

Our analysis of tradition contrasts with previous ones, which usually involved some form of essentialist fallacy: that is, they equate traditions with fixed characteristics. They then identify variations from these characteristics. In effect, the essential parts of any tradition are necessarily present in all its adherents say or do. At other times, traditions are said to have an internal logic of development so the principles in a tradition fix their own use. We regard traditions as contingent: that is, people produce them through their actions as agents. So, to grasp the content and nature of

a tradition, students of politics have to decentre it. A decentred study of a tradition, practice or institution unpacks the way in which it is created, sustained and modified through the beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals in many arenas. The study of politics, for example, should go beyond the state to explore topics as diverse as drains, telegraph wires, schools, managing risk and developing self-esteem (Barry *et al.* 1996). It should do so because the discourses and practices that govern society arise out of these micro-practices. We have to redefine tradition in a non-essentialist, decentred manner to avoid any lingering sense of objective reason.

Nonetheless, because the idea of a tradition suggests that subjects can change their heritage for reasons that make sense to them, it also encourages us to move away from the post-structuralists' simple rejection of truth or objective reason. We should grapple here with the nature and effects of local reasoning. While a rejection of the autonomous subject prevents a belief in a neutral or universal reason, the fact of agency enables us to accept local reasoning in a way that Foucault is reluctant to do. Even philosophers who reject the possibility of pure experience and the existence of necessary truths tend to insist that a concern with consistency is a necessary feature of all webs of belief (Putnam 1981: 155–68, Quine 1960: 59). People try to organise their beliefs to fit consistently with their own notion of best belief.

Students of politics cannot understand changes in traditions, mentalities or discourses unless they link them to the reasons people had for making them. Traditions do not contain an inherent logic fixing their development: there are no compelling causes forcing individuals to change their beliefs and actions. Rather, we argue that people change their beliefs or actions in ways which depend on local reasoning. We cannot portray such changes as either purely arbitrary and random breaks or as explicable by allegedly objective social facts. Change occurs in response to dilemmas. A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to an existing idea and so forces reconsideration. Because we cannot read off the beliefs and actions of individuals from objective social facts about them, we can understand how the social practices they produce change only by exploring the ways in which they conceive of, and respond to, dilemmas.

Relativism

Once we allow for local reasoning, we can meet the charges of relativism and irrationalism so often levelled at both post-structuralism and postmodernism. Although we do not have access to pure facts that we can use to declare particular interpretations and narratives to be true or

false, we can still hang on to the idea of objectivity. We can define objectivity in anthropological terms by using criteria of comparison. So, we judge one narrative better than another because it best meets such criteria as: accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency and opening new avenues of enquiry. Objectivity arises from criticising and comparing rival webs of interpretation about agreed facts. The clear difference between this approach and conventional approaches to studying politics is that all interpretations are provisional. We cannot appeal to the logic of refutation as if we are scientists doing experiments to disprove earlier findings. Rather, objectivity rests on criteria of comparison. The interpretation we select will not be one that reveals itself as a given truth. Rather, we will select the 'best' interpretation by a process of gradual comparison.

Example: analysing Thatcherism

Our preferred interpretive theory deploys the concepts of tradition and dilemma to provide narrative accounts of beliefs and preferences and the practices to which they give rise. We can show how this theory works by considering the empirical case of Thatcherism (this section paraphrases Bevir and Rhodes 1998). In this example, we identify the Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist traditions in the UK and show how each tradition produces distinct analyses of Thatcherism. Table 6.1 sketches the four traditions and their account of Thatcherism. We provide a brief summary of each tradition and an example of one of its narratives of 'Thatcherism'. We then explore the associated problems of essentialism and identifying traditions.

Table 6.1   *Traditions and Thatcherism*

	Tory	*Liberal*	*Whig*	*Socialist*
Traditions	Preserving traditional authority	Restoring the markets undermined by state intervention	Evolutionary change	Role of the state in resolving the crises of capitalism
'Thatcherisms'	Party and electoral survival	Reversing Britain's decline	Strong leadership and distinct ideology give new policy agenda	Failure of the developmental state

The Tory tradition

The Tory tradition is elusive and all too often defined more by what it is not. Gilmour (1978) argues that the Conservative Party is not averse to change (1978: 121), not a pressure group (ibid.: 130), and not ideological (ibid.: 132). More positively, he contends that 'the fundamental concern of Toryism is the preservation of the nation's unity, of the national institutions, of political and civil liberty' (ibid.: 143). Some strands recur in the Tory tradition. For example, Michael Oakeshott provides the philosophical underpinnings for several Tory narratives. Ian Gilmour (1978: 92–100; 1992: 272–3) adopts Oakeshott's distinction between the state as a civil association and the state as an enterprise association. An enterprise association is: 'human beings joined in pursuing some common substantive interest, in seeking the satisfaction of some common want or in promoting some common substantive interest'. In contrast, persons in a civil association 'are not joined in any undertaking to promote a common interest ... but in recognition of non-instrumental rules indifferent to any interest': that is, a set of common rules and a common government in pursuing their diverse purposes (Gilmour 1978: 98). So, a free society has: 'no preconceived purpose, but finds its guide in a principle of continuity ... and in a principle of consensus' (Gilmour 1978: 97). The Tory tradition favours civil association and only accepts the state as an enterprise association 'when individuals are able to contract out of it when it suits them' (Gilmour 1992: 272). Nonetheless, Gilmour (1978: 236) accepts that some state intervention will often be convenient, practical politics, essential to preserving the legitimacy of the state.

One Nation Toryism is one narrative of 'Thatcherism' in the Tory tradition. It sees Thatcherism as a threat to both the Conservative Party and to national unity. Gilmour (1992) is scathing about the 'dogma' of 'Thatcherism'. He argues that 'Thatcherism' is based on 'a simplistic view of human nature'. He disputes that 'everyone is driven by selfish motives' and that 'everyone pursues his selfish interests in a rational manner' (ibid.: 271). Thatcher is not a 'true Conservative ruler' because she bullied people into conformity with her view of Britain as an enterprise association (ibid.: 273). The economy was not transformed and 'Much social damage was also done'. 'British society became coarser and more selfish' (ibid.: 278). His brand of 'One Nation Toryism' holds that if the state is not interested in its people, they have no reason to be interested in the state (Gilmour 1978: 118). So, the government should ' "conserve" the fabric of society and avoid the shocks of violent upheavals' and 'look to the contentment of all our fellow countrymen' (Gilmour 1992: 278).

The Liberal tradition

The narrative of 'Thatcherism' as the revival of nineteenth-century liberalism, with its faith in free markets, determined to slay the dragon of collectivism and reverse Britain's decline, both economic and international, is one of the clichés of British government in the late twentieth century. But, like so many clichés, it did not become one without containing a large grain of truth. This narrative has its roots in the Liberal tradition's stories about markets.

'New Conservatism' revived the Liberal tradition by stressing freedom, applying the principles of freedom to the economy and accepting the welfare state on sound Conservative grounds. For Willetts (1992), Adam Smith's 'system of natural liberty' provides the intellectual justification of free markets. Markets tap 'two fundamental human instincts': the instinct to better oneself and the instinct to exchange. These instincts, when 'protected by a legal order which ensures contracts are kept and property is respected' are 'the source of the wealth of nations'. Big government cannot deliver prosperity, undermines markets and erodes communities. However, 'rampant individualism without the ties of duty, loyalty and affiliation is only checked by powerful and intrusive government'. So, Conservatism stands between collectivism and individualism and 'Conservative thought at its best conveys the mutual dependence between the community and the free market. Each is enriched by the other' (Willetts 1992: 182). The Conservative Party's achievement is to reconcile Toryism and individualism. It was also Thatcher's achievement.

'Thatcherism' is not the antithesis of Conservatism because it too recognises there is 'more to life than free markets'; it too sought to reconcile 'economic calculation with our moral obligations to our fellow citizens' (Willetts 1992: 47). Its distinctiveness does not lie in 'Mrs Thatcher's actual political beliefs – very little of what she said could not have been found in a typical One Nation Group pamphlet of the 1950s' (Willetts 1992: 52). It is distinctive because of Thatcher's 'political qualities'; her energy and conviction; her ability to move between general principles and the practical; and her judgement about which issues to fight (Willetts 1992: 52–3).

So, the 'Thatcherism' narrative in the Liberal tradition restores markets to their rightful place in Conservatism: it 'is within the mainstream of conservative philosophy' (Willetts 1992: 54). It also shows great political skill. The government stuck to its principles and showed that the commitment to freedom meets people's aspirations and made them prosperous (Willetts 1992: 61). State intervention stultifies. Competition improves performance: 'Free markets are ... the route to prosperity' (Willetts 1992: 136).

So, the narrative in the Liberal tradition stresses markets and its storyline emphasises the need to reverse Britain's economic decline through free markets sustained by an enterprise culture.

The Whig tradition

The Whig tradition typically uses the Westminster model (for a guide and references see Bevir and Rhodes 1999; Tivey 1988). This model has many variants but the family of concepts includes Britain as a unitary state characterised by: parliamentary sovereignty; strong cabinet government; accountability through elections; majority party control of the executive (that is, prime minister, cabinet and the civil service); elaborate conventions for the conduct of parliamentary business; institutionalised opposition; and the rules of debate (Gamble 1990: 407). The Whig tradition also incorporates an idealist strand, seeing 'institutions as the expression of human purpose' and focusing, therefore, on the interaction between ideas and institutions (see Rhodes 1997; Gamble 1990: 409; Johnson 1975: 276–7). It highlights: 'how institutions and ideas react and co-operate with one another' (Greenleaf 1983: xi); gradualism; and the capacity of British institutions to evolve and cope with crisis. Indeed, Whig historiography comes perilously close to telling the story of a single, unilinear, progressive idea, reason or spirit underlying the evolution of the British political system. Institutions provide the 'capacity for independent action, leadership and decision' while remaining 'flexible and responsive'. As important, the political science profession esteemed this tradition; they 'were largely sympathetic' (Gamble 1990: 411); 'convinced that change needed to be evolutionary'; and celebrated 'the practical wisdom embodied in England's constitutional arrangements' (Gamble 1990: 409; and for recent examples see Hennessy 1995; Norton 1998). In this tradition, power is an object that belongs to the prime minister, cabinet or civil service. So, 'power relationships are a zero-sum game where there is a winner and a loser' and power is 'ascribed to an institution or person and fixed to that person regardless of the issue or the context' (Smith 1999). Personality is a key part of any explanation of an actor's power. The Whig tradition's narrative of 'Thatcherism' contains these characteristics.

Kavanagh (1990) uses the theme of 'the end of consensus', and an analysis of the interplay between events, ideas and actors, to argue that the political agenda of British government has been substantially rewritten. Consensus refers to agreement between political parties and governing elites about: the substance of public policy; the rules of the political game; and the political style for resolving policy differences (Kavanagh 1990: 6). Thatcher had a distinctive set of New Right-inspired policies: using

monetary policy to contain inflation; reducing the public sector; freeing the labour market through trade union reform; and restoring the government's authority. These policies would take the shackles off markets and create the enterprise society. He concludes the government was 'radical and successful' (Kavanagh 1990: 241); 'reversed the direction of previous post-war administrations' (Kavanagh 1990: 209); and pursued policies, which appeared far-fetched in 1978, such as privatisation, but which are no longer exceptional (Kavanagh 1990: 281). In typical balanced, not to say Whig, style, Kavanagh opines that 'talk of permanent or irreversible changes may be too bold', but 'the Thatcher government has created a new agenda, one which a successor government will find difficult to reverse' (Kavanagh 1990: 302).

This narrative accommodates 'Thatcherism' to the Whig tradition in two ways. First, it identifies the constraints on political action and the continuities in policy to domesticate the political convulsions of the 1980s. Thus, Kavanagh (1990: 15, 18, 238–41): treats 'events' as a constraint on political leadership; recognises the changes had many causes; and muses how 'disappointment has been a fact of life for British ... governments'. Nonetheless, there has been change and Thatcher is central to his explanation. So, second, this Whig narrative explains change by appeal to the personal power of Thatcher. Kavanagh repeatedly describes her as the 'dominant figure'; and 'a remarkable figure' (Kavanagh 1990: 243, 272, 276, 318). Of course, he is not claiming 'that personal leadership is all-important but Mrs Thatcher's personality and policies enabled her to take advantage of the constellation of events and ideas'. Nonetheless, the storyline of this narrative assigns great explanatory power to Thatcher's personal qualities and her distinctive policies. Above all, it is part of the Whig tradition. Kavanagh (1990: 209) makes the point succinctly: 'Over the long term, continuity is more apparent than discontinuity.'

The Socialist tradition

The Socialist tradition, with its structural explanations focused on economic factors and class and its critique of capitalism, tells a historical story which is anti-Whig. For example, Marquand (1988: 198) comments: 'The old Whig historians were not wrong in thinking that Britain's peaceful passage to democracy owed much to the hazy compromises.' However, 'once these compromises cease to be taken for granted', then 'respect for the rules of the game will ebb away'. So, the Whig tradition collapses because it confronts a heterogeneous, pluralistic society in which authority has been demystified, cultural values have changed, the political system has lost legitimacy and territorial politics is in disarray (Marquand

1988: 199–204). Although the Socialist narratives of 'Thatcherism' come in many guises, we provide one brief illustration.

Marquand (1988) explores why the Keynesian social democratic governing philosophy collapsed and the main economic and political problems which a successor philosophy must address. He argues the collapse took place because Britain failed to become a developmental state. Britain failed 'to adapt to the waves of technological and institutional innovation sweeping through the world economy' and 'Britain's political authorities ... repeatedly failed to promote more adaptive behaviour' (Marquand 1988: 145). Britain failed to become an adaptive, developmental state because of a: 'political culture suffused with the values and assumptions of whiggery'; and because 'The whole notion of public power, standing apart from private interests, was ... alien' and so a developmental state could not exist (Marquand 1988: 154).

The Westminster model also inhibited an adaptive response. The basis of this model is parliamentary sovereignty, which 'inhibits the open and explicit power-sharing on which negotiated adjustment depends' (Marquand 1988: 176). The British crisis is a crisis of maladaptation coupled with: a loss of consent and growing distrust between governments and governed; possessive individualism or sectional interests dominating the common interest; and 'mechanical reform' or change through command, not persuasion (Marquand 1988: 211–12). In short, Britain failed to adapt because of its political culture was rooted in reductionist individualism.

Marquand's account of 'Thatcherism' stresses the congruence between its market liberalism and a British political culture of possessive individualism and the inability of both to deal with the crisis of maladaptation (1988: 72–81). In short, the liberal solution deals with the effects of state intervention, political overload and bureaucratic oversupply, not with the dynamics or causes of these processes. Possessive individualism is the cause of Britain's maladaptation, so it cannot provide the solution which lies in common, not individual, purposes and the developmental, not minimal, state. As a result, 'Thatcherism' contains three paradoxes (Marquand 1988: 81–8; 1989). First, the policies for a free economy conflict with the need for a strong, interventionist state to engineer the cultural change needed to sustain that free economy. Second, the wish to arrest national decline conflicts with the free trade imperatives of liberalism because of the weakness of the British economy. Third, the attack on intermediate institutions – the BBC, local government and the universities – undermines the Tory tradition which sees them as bastions of freedom: markets conflict with community.

In short, the Socialist narratives interpret the 'end of consensus' as part of the crisis of British capitalism stemming from its inability to become a

developmental state. 'Thatcherism' is a local response to this crisis and is beset by internal contradictions. Free markets are a transitional solution for the open economy of a medium-sized industrial country operating in a global economy.

So, the important lesson to be learnt from this analysis is that there are several overlapping but competing constructions of Thatcherism each rooted in a distinct and distinctive tradition. None is unquestionably 'right'. None is unquestionably 'wrong'. We can debate and agree which account is more accurate, comprehensive and open, but any such agreement will be provisional. Our account thus deals with the issues of essentialism and how to identify traditions. Essentialists equate traditions with an unchanging core idea or ideas and then explore variations. But there is no such core to Thatcherism. There are many ideas and although some of these ideas were widely shared, none was common to all. So, there is no essentialist account of 'Thatcherism'. Even the search for a multidimensional explanation is doomed. It is not a question of identifying the several political, economic and ideological variables and determining their relative importance. It is not a question of levels of analysis. It is more fundamental. The maps, questions and language of each narrative prefigure and encode different historical stories in distinctive ways. Historical stories as different as preserving traditional authority, restoring markets, gradualism and resolving the crises of capitalism construct the phenomenon of 'Thatcherism' in radically different ways. There is no single notion to be explained. It was not an objective, given, social phenomenon with a single clear identity, but rather several overlapping but different entities constructed within overlapping but different traditions.

Because an individual can be placed in many traditions depending on the purposes of the study, the content of any tradition will vary with what we want to explain. We will identify traditions according to our own purposes, selecting one from the many because it best explains the actions and beliefs of the individual we are studying. The choice of tradition depends on what we are trying to explain. We can pick from a plurality of traditions at many levels of generality. The task confronting the scholar is to find the sources of evidence, which show that each historical story has a coherent set of ideas, and to trace the relevant connections between the ideas through time. So, this analysis of Thatcherism shows how several traditions adapted to its ideas and argues that scholars construct traditions to answer the questions that interest them. We judge the usefulness of such a construction by the evidence marshalled to show the links between the ideas over time and the ability to explain how beliefs change.

Criticisms of interpretive theory

Other political scientists react to interpretive theory in three main ways. The most accommodating recognise interpretation as an integral part of social explanation. A famous example is Max Weber's account of *verstehen* (Weber 1978, Vol. 1: 4–22). Weber champions explanations through ideal types that provide satisfactory accounts of action incorporating the analysis of both meaning (of intentions) and objective (quantified) data. Some political scientists regard interpretive theory as useful for limited areas of their discipline: for example, the study of values and ideologies. Finally, hostile political scientists reject interpretive approaches as inappropriate, or as superseded by a positive, scientific alternative. Interpretive theorists should allow that objective data can provide useful guides to research and reinforce some conclusions. They also need to respond to the specific criticisms raised by political scientists. Two criticisms are prominent and important: first, that interpretive theories do not adequately account for material reality; and, second, that interpretive theories provide no basis for criticising social life. Different species of interpretive theory rebuff such criticisms differently. Neither criticism can be accepted as it stands.

On material reality

For some critics, interpretive approaches do not allow for the material constraints on social action. Although interpretive theorists must indeed remain implacably opposed to any form of economic reductionism, they can allow for economic influences in several ways. For a start, we might accept that dilemmas often reflect material circumstances. The important point is the subjective beliefs people hold about the world, but these beliefs often arise because of pressures in the world. For example, the dilemma of inflation was an agreed, accurate perception of a real economic pressure, even if it was variously constructed and the responses to that pressure were equally varied. There is a real world 'out there', and while we do not have unmediated access to it, it is a source of pressures. In addition, just because a government acts on a particular view of the world does not mean its view of the world determines the effects of its action. The effects will depend on how others react and their reactions will collectively constitute relevant material reality. Whether a new deal for the long-term unemployed will lead to them getting jobs depends, for example, on how they react to the opportunities given to them, how employers view them, and the state of the economy.

Other critics complain similarly that interpretive approaches cannot account for the solidity and persistence of institutions. We argue that they

can, depending on how we think about institutions. Many present-day interpretive theories deny that institutions have a reified or essential nature. They challenge us to decentre institutions: that is, to analyse the ways in which they are produced, reproduced and changed through the particular and contingent beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals. Even when an institution maintains similar routines while personnel change, it does so only because the successive personnel hold similar beliefs and preferences which their predecessors passed on. So, we should not say that interpretive theory is lacking on institutions, but rather that it rethinks the nature of institutions. Interpretive theory sees institutions as sedimented products of contingent beliefs and preferences.

On critique

Another criticism of interpretive theories suggests that they lack critical power. The varieties inspired by hermeneutics and ethnology seemingly must accept the self-understanding of those they study. But we can ascribe unconscious or even irrational beliefs to people in a process of interpretation. Our 'thick descriptions' are still our interpretations of other people's constructions and the logic of comparing webs of interpretation still applies. Similarly, the varieties of interpretive theory inspired by post-structuralism and postmodernism can appear to lack a notion of truth by which we can condemn beliefs as false. But, our anthropological approach to objectivity means we can dismiss some beliefs without appealing to some notion of absolute truth. Indeed, because we reject absolute truth, we are compelled to oppose those political ideologies claiming to be based on such a truth. We should deconstruct all those discourses that try to close themselves off, or that dismiss alternatives as unreasonable or absent. Such deconstruction would apply not only to fascism or communism but arguably also to many varieties of liberal universalism (Bevir 2000).

Of course, to condemn systems of belief as false is not to dismiss them as ideological in the sense of being reflections of a class interest. Because interpretive theory opposes economic reductionism, it must avoid such a concept of ideology. Nonetheless, it can keep the idea of ideology as distorted belief, where distortions are identified with departures from the norms of belief formation (Bevir 1996). Ideologies would thus have a close association to lies, the unconscious, and contradictory beliefs. Imagine that politicians say unemployment has risen because of a global recession while believing it did so because of a global recession aggravated by government policy. We could condemn their utterances as ideological, not because they are false, but because they involve deception. Their words hide their true beliefs for political advantage.

Conclusion

Interpretive theory encompasses many approaches opposed to the positivism that provides the basis for so much political science. It takes seriously the role of ideas and meanings in individual lives and social practices. Most interpretive theorists argue that the meaningful nature of human life makes the model of natural science inappropriate to political studies. Some insist the human sciences must understand the objects they study rather than seek explanations for them (Winch 1958). Others insist the human sciences are explanatory but distinguish the narrative form of explanation from the strictly causal form found in most natural science.

Although interpretive approaches all focus on ideas and meanings, they often take different views of their nature. Many of the key debates following the rise of post-structuralism and postmodernism concern the nature of the subject and the limits of reason. Many traditional varieties of interpretation came dangerously close to embodying an analysis of the subject as autonomous and an analysis of reason as pure and universal. Post-structuralists and postmodernists rightly criticise such analyses. They prompt us to decentre traditions and practices. Conversely, postmodern and post-structuralist varieties of interpretation teeter on denying any scope to the subject and to reason. The future for interpretive theory lies in a course between the two. We might evoke a subject who is an agent but not an autonomous one, and local reasoning that never becomes universal.

For the second half of the twentieth century, many political scientists followed Bentham in asking: Is it true? Unfortunately for its proponents, as Greenleaf (1983, Vol. 1: 286) argues:

> The concept of a genuine social science has had its ups and downs, and it still survives, though we are as far from its achievement as we were when Spencer (or Bacon for that matter) first put pen to paper. Indeed it is all the more likely that the continuous attempts made in this direction serve only to demonstrate ... the inherent futility of the enterprise.

If copying the natural sciences will not tell what is and is not true, then perhaps we had better take to heart Cowling's (1963: 209) advice that:

> political explanation exists as philosophy and history ... political science ... and comparative government, when looked at critically dissolve into these two disciplines: and if they do not, they have not been looked at critically enough.

This chapter suggests the time has come to return to the discipline's historical and philosophical roots; to follow Coleridge and ask, 'What is the meaning of it?' We can scarcely find less prosaic culs-de-sac than the specialist sub-fields of modern political science.

Further reading

- Bernstein (1976 and 1991) provides a critical review of many of the social and political theories on which we draw.
- On hermeneutics and the philosophy of history, see Bauman (1978) and Jenkins (1995).
- On ethnographic methods, see Hammersley (1991) and Silverman (1993).
- On postmodernism, see Rosenau (1992).
- On Foucault in particular, see Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), McNay (1994), and for a biographical study Eribon (1991).
- On the varieties of interpretive theory, see Gibbons (1987) but there is no substitute for consulting the originals.

We have tried to suggest accessible summaries but you should read some of the main texts discussed in the chapter.

- Collingwood's autobiography (1978, Chapters V, VIII, X and XI) provides the best short summary of his approach.
- Geertz (1973, Chapter 1) is an elegant summary of ethnography.
- Berger and Luckman (1971) is deservedly a classic in the sociology of knowledge.
- Foucault (1977) is a good read, though all his main works have been highly influential.
- On our approach see Bevir (1999a) and for its application to British government see Bevir and Rhodes (1998, 1999) and Rhodes (1999, Chapter 8).

Chapter 7

Marxism

DAVID MARSH

It is common at present to pronounce the death of Marxism. In this view liberalism has triumphed over its old foe Marxism and capitalism has conquered communism (Fukuyama 1989; Bell 1960). Certainly, there is little doubt that Marxism is in crisis to the extent that it is out of fashion; even university sociology degrees these days are likely to feature many more courses drawing on postmodernist thought than on Marxism. At the same time, many intellectual Marxists have changed their position: again often embracing postmodernism and pluralism (see for example Laclau and Mouffe 1985). However, such crises are not new (Gamble 1999). Marxism, like other theories, has always developed by responding to intellectual challenges from sympathisers and critics and attempting to explain and understand changes in the social world that it is analysing. As such, this chapter argues that Marxism still has a great deal to offer the modern political scientist. To this end, I shall first examine how Marxism has changed in response to a series of challenges. Subsequently, I will assess its utility as a position within contemporary social science.

The development of Marxism

Here, I shall look at the version of Marxism that was dominant for the first hundred years after Marx's death, which I shall call classical Marxism, before discussing why and how Marxism has changed over time.

Classical Marxism

Unlike the other approaches considered in this book, Marxism owes its origins, and of course its name, to one man, Karl Marx. As such, much of the debate within Marxism has revolved around attempts to interpret and reinterpret Marx himself. Marx's work, like that of all theorists, contains inconsistencies and, as such, can, and has, sustained different interpretations. Nevertheless, for the first hundred years after Marx's death in 1883 there was one dominant interpretation of Marx and Marxism, which I shall call classical Marxism.

The core of classical Marxism is fairly clear, although contested. It is based upon a foundationalist ontology and a realist epistemology. So, to Marx there is a 'real' world 'out there'; it is an essentialist position because it contends that there are essential processes and structures that shape or cause contemporary social existence. Consequently, it is the social scientists' task to uncover these essential processes and structures. However, they may not be directly observable. As such, to Marx the real causal relations often lie beneath the surface appearance. Indeed, the appearance may systematically obscure the reality and, in doing so, forward particular economic interests.

There are four related 'isms' usually associated with classical Marxism: economism, determinism, materialism and structuralism. Marxism is economist to the extent that it privileges economic relations and determinist to the extent that it argues that economic relations determine social and political relations.

In this vein, Marx's analysis of capitalism concentrated upon the economy, which analytically he separated out from everything else. He saw it as inevitable that political institutions, laws, belief systems and even the forms of the family would conform to the basic requirements of the economic system. As such, the main function of the law was to protect private property and, consequently, the state was an agent of the ruling class. The economy thus caused or determined how the rest of the social system evolved and functioned. So, economic relations determined social relations, that is, relations between classes, and social relations determined political relations, in particular the form and actions of the state.

This formulation is clear in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; relations of production that correspond to a definitive stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definitive forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Here, to Marx, the mode of production of material life determines consciousness and the economic 'base' determines the 'superstructure', so agents have little, if any, autonomy. The position is materialist because Marx argues that material relations shape ideas and the dominant ideas at any time are those that forward the interests of the ruling class, that is, the owners and controllers of the means of production. This position is directly opposed to idealism, which sees ideas as a key cause of material changes (see, for example, Weber's works).

Under this interpretation Marxism is also structuralist to the extent that it contends that structures, particularly economic structures, determine the actions of agents. So, agents can be seen as little more than 'bearers' of their structural position. In this way, the state has no choice: it acts as an agent of the ruling class. This means that little, if any, space is given to the strategic calculations of subjects.

It is also important to emphasise that classical Marxism offers a meta-narrative (world-view), a position heavily criticised by recent anti-foundationalist, especially postmodern, thought. Classical Marxism presents a theory of history: a view of the past, the present and the future and how they are related. In this view, Marxism is rooted in the scientific principle of dialectics: so historical development is always characterised by a process in which the contradictions within a thesis stimulate an antithesis in which those contradictions are exposed and subsequently a synthesis generated that becomes the new thesis. For example, there are major internal contradictions in capitalism, such as its susceptibility to economic crisis, which will lead to its questioning and its replacement by socialism. Unfortunately, there is not enough space to explore any of these issues at length (see Gamble *et al.* 1999), but two points are important here. First, Marxism is seen as scientific; it has identified a theory of history that holds across time and space. Second, however, Marxism is an emancipatory position because it has a vision of progress that will result in an end to exploitation. In a socialist society in which everyone has the same relationship to the means of production there is no basis for any exploitation (on grounds of class, race, gender and so on) and so there will be a more just and equal society.

There is no doubt that this 'base/superstructure' model dominated readings of Marx for most of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. However, not all of Marx's work was as economistic, determinist, materialist and structuralist as this model suggests. Indeed, it has been argued that Marxism is characterised by an irresolvable dualism between a logic of necessity, clearly visible in what I have called classical Marxism, and a logic of contingency, which emphasises the political and negotiated nature of economic, social and political development. Furthermore, both those authors who have emphasised necessity and those who have stressed contingency have turned to Marx's own works to justify their positions.

Of course, there have been Marxists who opposed economism throughout the twentieth century, particularly, although certainly not exclusively, within the Second International; here, Kautsky, Lukács and especially

Gramsci are crucial. However, the last few decades were particularly marked by a struggle to rid Marxism of its economism, determinism, materialism and structuralism and it is these developments which we need to examine and explain before we can assess the utility of *contemporary* Marxism for political scientists. In my view, these developments indicate that Marxism is a thriving tradition that has evolved in response to criticism and to changes in the 'real' world.

Why has Marxism changed?

The main tenets of what I have called classical Marxism are now almost universally rejected by Marxists. There are three broad reasons for this change. First, Marxists have responded to theoretical critiques from both inside and outside the Marxist tradition. Second, such an economistic formulation has proved unable to explain economic, social and political developments. Third, economic, social and political changes in the world have stimulated new theoretical development. Obviously, I can only deal briefly with these three points here.

Theoretical critiques

Marxism has constantly been under challenge and critique from within and outside the tradition. If we consider the internal critiques first and take the development of Marxist state theory as an example, then the point is easily made. As Hay (1999b) shows, the work of Gramsci was crucial. Gramsci's emphasis upon the role of political or hegemonic struggle, the importance of ideology and the significance of agents, in his case parties, workers' councils and intellectuals, marked a break with economism, determinism and structuralism and such themes have been taken up and developed in modern Marxist state theory. Gramsci was influenced by some of the non-economistic arguments within the Second International but it also needs emphasising that he drew upon the tradition of Italian social and political thinking which traces back to Machiavelli. Subsequently, and this point is again well made by Hay (1999b), the work of Poulantzas, and particularly his attempt to theorise the relative autonomy of the state, was also crucial in the development of Marxist state theory. In both cases, Marxists taking issue with the Marxist orthodoxy have moved the debate on the theory of the state significantly forward.

It is equally easy to illustrate the influence on Marxism of critiques from outside that tradition. So, as an example, Johnston and Dolowitz (1999) show how Weberian ideas on class have influenced contemporary Marxist theory. Similarly, Jackson (1999) shows the way in which feminist critiques have influenced Marxist analyses of gender. This latter case is particularly

interesting as it has broader resonance. So, feminist thought has had a significant influence across the broad gamut of Marxist theory. As an example, it has strongly affected Marxist state theory. As the introduction to this book emphasises, feminism raises important questions about the definition of politics, revolving particularly around the distinction between the public and the private and the nature and sites of political power. In addition, it emphasises that gender is a, perhaps the, key basis of structured inequality which is reflected in definitions of politics and the nature and exercise of power. As Jackson (1999) shows, Marxist or socialist feminists attempt to incorporate class and gender into their analysis. However, more significantly, most Marxist theorists not directly concerned with gender (see, for example, Jessop,1982) have also acknowledged that gender is a crucial basis of structured inequality which cannot be reduced to class and which is reflected in the form and actions of the state.

Explaining economic, social and political change

Of course, one of the major reasons both for the theoretical critique of classical Marxism and for its resonance was that economism, determinism, materialism and structuralism did not offer a convincing explanation of economic, social and political developments. Empirical analysis indicated that economic relations of production did not *determine* culture and ideology or the form and actions of the state. So, for example, developed capitalist countries at similar stages of economic development and with comparable relations of production had different, more or less democratic or authoritarian, state forms. Similarly, any examination of the politics of capitalist states showed that policy decisions did not always and clearly forward the interests of the owners and controllers of capital. States clearly had autonomy, even though such autonomy was constrained, and, increasingly, Marxists aimed to theorise that autonomy, first by developing the concept of relative autonomy and, subsequently, by dropping notions of determinancy altogether.

The effect of economic, social and political change

It is also clear that economic, social and political change has had a major effect on the development of Marxism. At the economic level, the changes in advanced capitalism since Marx wrote have been phenomenal. Most important has probably been the internationalisation of capitalism. The current vogue is to talk of globalisation as though it has sprung upon us, and also to overestimate its effects in a way which has strong economistic overtones. However, the British economy at least had a strong

international orientation throughout the twentieth century and, indeed, many have argued that the international orientation of the British banking/financial sector has been a major cause of Britain's relative economic decline. Be that as it may, and accepting the point that the constraint that globalisation exercises on government policy can be overestimated, it is nevertheless clear that such developments have, as both Bromley (1999) and Kenny (1999) show, led to a major reinterpretation of Marxist political economy.

Social change has also clearly shaped the development of Marxism. Here, I shall take just two illustrative examples. First, changes in the social structure, including the growth of the public sector, the decline of the manufacturing sector, the rise of white-collar employment and the increase in the female labour force, have all had a significant effect on the Marxist conceptualisation of class, as Johnston and Dolowitz (1999) make clear. Second, the changing role of women, which owes something to economic changes but also much to the growth of feminism, has provided a major stimulus to Marxism's attempt to conceptualise more adequately the role of gender.

Political changes have also played a role. For a long period Marxist analysis of politics was affected by the situation in the Soviet Union. For over fifty years most Marxists felt it necessary to defend political practice in the Soviet Union. In addition, many Marxist intellectuals in Europe were attached to Communist parties with close links to Moscow and few questioned Moscow hegemony; although even here there were exceptions, so the PCI (the Communist Party of Italy) took a more independent line even from 1945. As such, few Marxist intellectuals wrote about politics and Ralph Miliband could claim when he published *The State and Capitalist Society* in 1969 that it was the first Marxist account of the state since Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (1917). This claim ignored Gramsci's work, but nevertheless had some validity. The death of Stalin in 1953 and the invasion of Hungary in 1956 were important events that led some Marxist intellectuals to question the practice of the Soviet Union. The subsequent decades saw individuals and even domestic Communist parties follow this road, moving away both from unquestioning support of the Soviet Union and from the ideological economism imposed by Moscow.

Here again it seems to me that the work of Gramsci was crucial. Stalin failed to stop him thinking heretical thoughts but Mussolini imprisoned him for over ten years. As such, his major work, *The Prison Notebooks* (1971), was not published in Italy until after the Second World War and only became widely available over the next two decades; indeed they had virtually no influence in the English-speaking world until they were

published by Lawrence & Wishart at the beginning of the 1970s. Then, given the social and political changes there had been, and given the poverty of Marxist economism, they found a receptive audience.

Contemporary Marxism

Marxism is a living theoretical tradition. We cannot find all truth in the work of a German intellectual writing around 150 years ago. However, Marxism is a rich tradition and one that has undergone substantial change as it has struggled to reject economism, determinism, materialism and structuralism. It is crucial that any critic of Marxism confronts these modern variants rather than setting up a more economistic view as a straw man.

At the same time, Marxism is a broad tradition. In an important sense, we no longer have Marxism but Marxisms and different authors acknowledge different debts to the Marxist tradition and use that tradition in significantly different ways. So, for example, Tant (1999) advances an argument which many other authors sympathetic to Marxism would find problematic: he wishes to defend a claim that Marxism can be viewed as a science if we adopt a more open definition of science. In contrast, Daly (1999) would reject any such claim: instead arguing that the world is discursively constructed and that, as such, there is no objective truth out there to be discovered. To him science and Marxism are discursive constructs. As such, Marxism is a discourse that can be used as an element in the construction of an emancipatory hegemonic project. Jackson's view (1999) is different again. She argues that we need to develop a materialist feminism which acknowledges its Marxist antecedents and takes from the Marxist tradition its emphasis upon the existence of crucial structural, and material, inequalities which constrain the actions of agents.

Despite the diversity that exists within modern Marxism, its broad response to the critiques and changes already identified is clear. Most modern Marxists adopt a critical realist epistemological position that differs from that found in classical Marxism and is clearly influenced by interpretist critiques.

Using the Marsh and Furlong classification in Chapter 1, the core of Marx's own classical realist epistemology lies in three propositions:

(i)   He shared with the positivists the view that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
(ii) However, unlike the positivists, Marx argued that many of the relationships between social phenomena in which we are interested cannot be directly observed.

(iii) Unlike the relativist, and in common with the positivist, Marx also believed that there is necessity in the world; so social phenomena do have causal powers and we can make causal statements.

The epistemological position of most modern Marxists, however, would also rest on two other propositions that owe a great deal to interpretist critiques:

(iv) Unlike positivists, while they acknowledge that social phenomena exist independently of our interpretation of them, they acknowledge, *pace* interpretism, that it is our interpretation and understanding of these social phenomena which affect outcomes; the production and interpretation of knowledge are theory-laden.

(v) As such, structures do not determine the actions of agents, rather they constrain and facilitate them. Social science involves the study of reflexive agents and these agents can deconstruct and reconstruct structures.

This is not the place to examine the validity and problems of this epistemological position; here, I merely wish to argue both that this shared epistemological position informs Marxist analysis and that most Marxists, as such, share a similar approach to some of the key problems in social science. Modern Marxists acknowledge that: there is an external world which is independent of our knowledge of it; the discursive construction of this external world has a crucial affect on political outcomes; but the nature of this external world constrains and/or facilitates that construction.

The thrust of this position is easily illustrated if we take as an example the phenomenon of globalisation that has become increasingly important in global politics during the 1980s and 1990s. As far as the critical realist is concerned, there are real processes of globalisation going on but it is the discursive construction of these processes which have shaped policy. So, there has been an increase in the internationalisation of trade and the flexibility of capital, and there has been a globalisation of American culture and an increase in the ease of global communication and the role of the global media. Of course, there are significant arguments about the extent of that globalisation, but there is little doubt that some has occurred. At the same time, however, the way that globalisation impacts upon national policy-making is mediated by its discursive construction by economists, businessmen and politicians particularly. In the British case, for example, the extent of globalisation, using the usual economic measures, is not as great as the dominant rhetoric about globalisation suggests, yet this rhetoric, rather than the reality, has shaped government economic policy throughout the 1990s. Nevertheless, the logic of the position is that the gap between the reality and the dominant discursive

construction allows space for the construction of an alternative discourse which, in the long run, would have more resonance to the extent that it more accurately reflected that reality.

At the same time, while modern Marxism is characterised by diversity, most of it: rejects economism; rejects determinancy, emphasising contingency; rejects materialism, acknowledging an independent role for ideas; rejects structuralism, accepting a key role for agents; no longer privileges class, acknowledging the crucial role of other bases of structured inequality; and, to an extent, privileges politics. All these developments can be illustrated by a brief consideration of the changes in Marxist state theory over the last thirty years.

In the 1970s Poulantzas' formulation (1973) of the relative autonomy of the state was seized upon by Marxists trying to escape economism because it allowed the state autonomy while retaining the determinancy of economic relations in the last instance. Poulantzas' conceptualisation had strong functionalist undertones. The state needed relative autonomy to forward the interests of 'capital in general'. More specifically, it: (i) mediated between the interest of the different fractions of capital (for example, preventing or defusing conflict between industrial and banking capital); (ii) mediated between classes in order to reduce the class tensions inevitable in a capitalist society (for example, by ensuring welfare state provision and manipulating ideology); and (iii) intervened in economic relations (for example, by establishing corporatist structures which incorporated labour in order to emasculate it).

In Poulantzas' view the state enshrines class interests because its form reflects the outcome of past class struggles: a process Poulantzas calls structural selectivity. In addition, the state knows best what is in the interest of capital and any concessions to other social forces, even if they are opposed by capital, are designed to forward the long-term interests of capital in general, if necessary as against the interest of particular capitals.

There are considerable problems with this conceptualisation, even if we reject the Popperian, positivist, notion that the theory is non-falsifiable because the last instance never comes. First, Poulantzas offers no explanation of how the state knows best, and no exposition of the mechanisms by which this knowledge is achieved. Furthermore, it is perhaps easier to point to examples of state failure rather than of state success in economic management. Second, the theory is still essentially economistic and deterministic, if only in the last instance. The concept of structural selectivity merely moves the economic determinancy back temporally; the outcome of past class struggles is reflected in the present state form and political outcomes. Third, Poulantzas still privileges social class and ignores the fact that the state reflects gender and race inequality as well as class inequality. Fourth, the position is still essentially materialist, giving

no independent role to ideas. Fifth, it is structuralist; there is little or no space for agency.

Jessop's response to these criticisms offers an excellent example of how modern Marxism has attempted to move away from economism, determinism, materialism and structuralism. He develops the concept of strategic selectivity as an alternative to Poulantzas' concept of structural selectivity. To Jessop the state form is inscribed with the outcomes of past strategic struggles between social forces. There are two immediately obvious differences between the structural and the strategic selectivity. First, Jessop talks of strategy and this conceptualisation implies calculating subjects. Structures do not determine outcomes; agents are not simply 'bearers' of structures. Rather, the relationship is dialectical: structures constrain and facilitate agents whose actions constitute and reconstitute the structures. Second, class is not privileged. Instead, it is acknowledged that gender, race, knowledge and so on are crucial bases of structured inequality which are inscribed in the state and which shape, while not determining, its actions.

At the same time, Jessop's approach also highlights the three other developments mentioned earlier. Most fundamentally, he rejects economism and determinism by arguing that no theory of the state is possible and, as such, outcomes are contingent. In Jessop's view the concept of relative autonomy is untenable: the state is autonomous and the extent to which its actions are constrained by the outcome of past strategic struggles is an open question. To Jessop, then, a state may be a capitalist state, forwarding the interests of capital, but such a relationship is contingent, not necessary, and is a matter for empirical investigation, not theoretical assertion. In addition, Jessop, like much of modern Marxism, is essentially politicist. By that I do not mean that he takes the state as a starting point for any analysis: rather his notion of strategic selectivity suggests that the form and actions of the state are the product of hegemonic, and essentially political, struggles. This immediately suggests that ideas have an independent effect on outcomes. Obviously, this development is even clearer in post-Marxist writers such as Laclau and Mouffe (see Daly 1999).

Of course it might be argued, and indeed has been argued, that the modern variants are no longer Marxist precisely because they reject economism, the primacy of class and the Marxist theory of history. To many, this is a crucial question because they see the modern Marxism described here as no different from Weberianism or pluralism. Certainly, if one defines Marxism in narrow economistic terms then this line of criticism of much contemporary Marxism is true by definition. However, Marxists like Jessop take the work of Marx and others in the Marxist tradition as their point of departure and, as such, in my view, are Marxists. Similarly, some would argue that the diversity of approaches within

Marxism is a weakness: that there is now no such thing as a Marxist position. In contrast, my view is that this is rather a strength. Marxism has developed considerable flexibility in response both to its critics and the changes that have occurred in the 'real' world. Its utility should be judged in terms of its capacity to help us explain and understand those changes.

What has Marxism to offer?

Many would argue that Marxism is in decline, in large part because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the triumph of New Right ideology and contemporary changes in capitalism and that, as such, it has nothing to offer to contemporary social science. In fact, I shall take issue with every element of that argument. I shall suggest, first, that the collapse of the Soviet Union removes a constraint on Marxism, the need to justify developments in Eastern Europe, which was very damaging to the development of Marxism for most of the twentieth century. Second, I shall argue that the New Right tide may be ebbing, that the rampant individualism associated with the elevation of market forces as a universal panacea may be being tempered with a new belief, in Britain at least, that there is such a thing as society, that collective values are important if a society is to function effectively. Third, and in my view most important, the changes in contemporary capitalism, and particularly the increases in inequality which marked the 1980s and 1990s, make the Marxist explanation and critique more relevant.

Surviving the collapse of communism

I have no space to deal with this issue at any length. However, Robinson (1999) reviews the relationship between Marxism and the Soviet Union and I would endorse his conclusion (1999: 317):

> It is thus ironic that Marxist analysis of post-communism might actually be very healthy. The collapse of the communist states frees Marxists from the need to continually go over old and stale ground. Interest in the changes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe is attracting Marxist, neo-Marxist and post-Marxist scholars who were not involved in the earlier debates and faction fights. There are also signs of a critical Marxism developing in the East which might eventually help refresh analysis.

The point here is both that the collapse of communism frees Marxism from an inhibiting legacy and that, at the same time, it offers fruitful new fields of study.

The triumph of neo-liberalism?

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the rise of neo-liberal discourse to a position of dominance and against this background critical discourses have found it difficult to find any space or resonance. Neo-liberal ideas and US-style capitalism seemed to have carried all before them; indeed, many talked of the end of ideology, and even the end of history, as all apparently converged towards a view which suggested that the market was good and the state bad, the private good and the public bad. However, there is abundant evidence that unfettered capitalism causes more problems than it solves and while the neo-liberal discourse continues to dominate there are signs that it too is likely to be questioned.

Two examples will illustrate this point. First, the major global financial crisis of the late 1990s provides particular evidence of the weaknesses of capitalism. This crisis began in Thailand in late 1997 when a mixture of internal economic problems and imprudent engagement with the free-wheeling Western financial system resulted in a run on the local currency and a collapse of the local stock market. However, the crisis now threatens to spread systemic instability. From Thailand the financial contagion swept on to embrace South Korea and Indonesia. As the financial panic continued to run through the region it became clear that even the mighty Japanese economy was in trouble. A widespread regional economic down-turn ensued which has had severe political consequences and has caused extensive social dislocation, with millions in the poorer countries thrown into poverty.

Initially, the crisis was dismissed in the West as a peculiarity of Asian capitalism and indeed was seen by some observers as offering a opportunity to force the structures of the Asian economies more into line with those of the West. However, the crisis soon spread to all those areas of the global economy which Western investment bankers have defined as 'emerging markets'. The Russian currency collapsed and the country's banks defaulted on foreign loans, to be followed by Brazil, the most powerful of the Latin American economies. It was at this point that alarm bells finally began to ring in the capital cities of the metropolitan capitalist heartlands of the West.

In Asia it was primarily Japanese and European Union banks which were exposed, and in Russia almost exclusively banks from EU countries. However, in Brazil and Latin America it was US banks which were heavily committed. At this stage, Washington, the home of neo-liberalism and the base from which the US government had endeavoured, in the years following the end of the Cold War, to organise global neo-liberal settlement, became seriously concerned (see Sachs 1998). Doubts were also beginning to be expressed in respect of the technical competence of the

financial institutions of Western capitalism, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Wade and Venerosa 1998).

Nevertheless, perhaps the collapse of the giant hedge fund, the Long-Term Capital Management Fund (LTCMF; the irony of this name hardly needs emphasising), is the best reflection of the contradiction within contemporary capitalism. Hedge funds were devised to insulate big players in the international currency market; if we are living through a period of casino capitalism, hedge funds attempt to fix the roulette wheel so the big players don't lose. The LTCMF involved two Nobel Prize economists and a supposedly foolproof system. It lost, or more accurately gambled away, $100 billion dollars and had to be bailed out by the US government.

Of course, even if there is an economic, in particular a financial, crisis, this does not mean that the dominant discourse will quickly and inevitably be undermined. However, in the aftermath of this crisis and the aftermath of 11 September 2001, world markets are far from the state of equilibrium predicted by neo-classical economics. In addition, the credibility of the international institutions, which have done much to promote neo-liberal orthodoxy, notably the World Bank and the IMF, has been reduced. So much so that even *The Times* (a UK daily paper owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International Group), hardly a radical newspaper, claimed in the late 1990s that: 'the IMF reputation has sunk to its lowest since the body was set up ... in 1944' (quoted in Hobsbawn 1998: 4).

Actually, it seems to me that not only the credibility of the World Bank and the IMF, but also the whole of the dominant neo-liberal discourse, is under threat. As Kaletsky (1998) puts it:

> All over the world extreme free market ideology is now in retreat and is likely to retreat much further in the years ahead. The reason is obvious. Even though global capitalism will recover from the present crisis, the ideological claim that markets work best when left to their own devices has been exposed as a myth.

This view is endorsed by the person who has probably benefited most from playing the financial markets, George Soros. He argues (Giddens and Pierson 1998: 221; for a fuller development of his views see Soros 2000): 'Unless we review our concept of markets, our understanding of markets, they will collapse, we are creating global markets without understanding their true nature.' He continues (Giddens and Pierson 1998: 225–6): 'We need some international regulation to match the globalisation of markets. Because what is lacking is the ability of society to impose constraints on the market.'

At the same time, Soros recognises that the global competition which characterises contemporary capitalism is socially divisive (Giddens and Pierson 1998: 225): 'with the accumulation of wealth there comes increased

social division and the majority of people don't benefit from the global economy'. More specifically, he argues (ibid.: 223):

> What global competition has done has been to benefit capital at the expense of labour, and to benefit financial capital to the detriment of fixed investments. Because capital is more mobile than labour, and financial capital is the most mobile of all, more mobile than direct investment.

In the context of increased evidence of the weaknesses, and even the contradictions, of contemporary capitalism, there appears to be a growing space for radical socialist ideas, and indeed more radical politics, and Marxism can contribute to this renewed debate.

Second, the work of Naomi Klein charts both some of the excesses of global capitalism and the rise of anti-globalisation movements. In addition, it is widely read; it has sold ten million copies to date and has been on bestseller lists throughout the world. She sees the world as a global village characterised by exploitation and massive inequalities (Klein 2001: xvii):

> This is a village where some multi-nationals, far from leveling the global playing field with jobs and technology for all, are in the process of mining the planet's poorest back country for unimaginable profits. This is the village where Bill Gates lives, amassing a fortune of $55 billion while a third of his workforce is classified as temporary workers, and where competitors are either incorporated into the Microsoft monolith or made obsolete by the latest feat in software bundling.

Klein sees the opposition to corporate power as the cause of the first decade in the twenty-first century (2001: xxix)

> Simply put, anti-corporatism is the brand of politics capturing the imagination of the next generation of troublemakers and shit-disturbers, and we need only look at the student radicals of the 1960s and the Id warriors of the eighties and nineties to see the transformative impact such a shift can have.

In addition, she sees the corporations as the cause of their own problems (435):

> By attempting to enclose our shared culture in sanitised and controlled brand cocoons, these corporations have themselves created the surge of opposition described in this book.

Not surprisingly then, she sees the influence of the anti-globalisation NGOs as a key feature of contemporary politics (443):

The emerging movement even has a major victory under its belt: getting the multi-lateral Agreement on Investment taken off the agenda of the OECD in April 1998. As the *Financial Times* [UK daily newspaper which centres on the financial markets] noted with some bewilderment at the time: 'The opponents' decisive weapon is the Internet. Operating from around the world via web sites, they have condemned the proposed agreement as a secret conspiracy to ensure global domination for and by multinational companies, and mobilised a grassroots resistance.' The article went on to quote a WTO official who said, 'The NGOs have tasted blood. They'll be back for more.' Indeed they will.

Klein may be over-optimistic about achieving the changes she wants, but there is little doubt that there is a growth of anti-globalisation sentiment and activity (for example, the anti-WTO protest in Seattle, 1999), and one of the best indicators of that is surely the popularity and sales of her book.

The utility of Marxism

Changes in capitalist economies since the mid-1970s have made the Marxist explanation and critique of contemporary capitalism more relevant. In the limited space available here, I will illustrate the current utility of Marxism by examining the growth of structured inequality that has occurred in both Britain and the USA since the 1970s.

There can be little doubt that developed capitalist countries are characterised by structured inequality or indeed that in many it has increased since the 1970s (see Ginsburg 1992). In this section I shall briefly consider three key bases of structured inequality, class, gender and race in the British and US contexts. Of course, the effect of these three structures on political outcomes is mediated through both education and knowledge and access to political power. While there is no simple relationship between social structural factors and political outcomes, these patterns of structured inequality are reflected in access to the three key resources actors use in trying to shape political outcomes: money; knowledge; and political power. My argument is not a determinist one: rather I contend that these factors interact to constrain and facilitate, that is to shape, political outcomes, and that Marxism, unlike more mainstream approaches like pluralism, focuses on these structural constraints, thus offering more interesting insight into explaining the operation of contemporary capitalism.

Structured inequality in Britain

In Britain, structured inequality is reflected in each of the three resource dimensions mentioned above. There are significant inequalities of wealth

and income; so in 1996 the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population owned 52 per cent of the marketable wealth and the figure rose to 63 per cent if the value of houses was not included. In addition, these inequalities have increased significantly since the 1970s. So, the Rowntree Inquiry into Income and Wealth found that between 1977 and 1990 there was rising inequality in France, West Germany, Norway, Australia, Holland, Japan, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. More specifically, only the rise in New Zealand was greater than in Britain. Indeed, during Mrs Thatcher's tenure in Downing Street average income rose by 36 per cent but the income of the bottom 10 per cent fell by 14 per cent while that of the top 10 per cent rose by 64 per cent. It is also clear that these inequalities in wealth and income are related to gender and race. So, for example, the average earnings of women in Britain in 1995 were 72 per cent of men's, while the average wage of non-manual women was only 64 per cent of that of non-manual men (see Marsh, 2002).

At the same time, although there is considerable debate about the concept of an underclass, there is a significant section of the population that is caught in a poverty trap. The British Government's own figures show that 14 per cent of the population (eight million) is totally dependent on welfare. Other figures show 24 per cent of the population living in poverty, 17 per cent receiving income support, 19 per cent of households with no working adults and so it goes on. Children from such backgrounds do much worse at school, are one and a half times more likely to have a long-standing illness and twice as likely to have a disability. They are much more likely to be black and women who are lone parents; so, for example, between 1979 and 1993 the proportion of lone parents in poverty increased from 19 per cent to 58 per centm (see Marsh 2002).

Of course, there is social mobility, but while there is evidence to suggest that it is greater now than previously (see Saunders 1996; and for a critique of this work Marshall *et al.* 1997) it is still limited. In particular, upward social mobility is more common than downward social mobility (see Marsh, 2002). Origins still shape, but don't determine, destinations.

Structured inequality is also reflected in education. English fee-paying schools, such as Eton, are a clear bastion of privilege, as is Oxbridge (see Adonis and Pollard 1997: Ch. 2). In a less extreme form the education system generally reflects similar patterns of privilege. Working-class children are less likely to stay on at school or to attend university. As far as race is concerned, Asian achievement is very similar to that of whites but blacks are only a third as likely to obtain GCSEs and A levels or to go to university as other groups. In contrast, the educational achievement of men and women is similar. Here, one of the chief differences is in subjects studied, with some researchers arguing that boys are much more likely to

study maths and science, a choice that benefits them in the labour market (on these relations see Reid 1998: Ch. 7).

Moving to access to positions of political power, the underrepresentation of the working class, women and blacks in the political elite hardly needs demonstrating; although the percentage of women in the House of Commons increased significantly after the 1997 election, due to the Labour Party's introduction of a women-only shortlist, a practice which has been subsequently ruled illegal by the courts. The dominant political elites in Britain are overwhelmingly white, male and middle-class, if not by birth, then by education (see Butler and Butler, 2000).

Structured inequality in the USA

A similar pattern exists in the United States. In 1976 the wealthiest 1 per cent of Americans owned 19 per cent of all the private material wealth in the United States. By 1995 they owned 40 per cent of the wealth and their share is greater than that owned by the bottom 92 per cent of the population combined (see Wolff 1995). While average earnings have risen, inequalities of earnings have grown much faster. So, between 1979 and 1995 the bottom 60 per cent of the population saw their incomes decrease in 1990 dollars. The income of the next 20 per cent showed modest gains, while the top 20 per cent saw an 18 per cent increase in income (see Wolff 1995). Most dramatically, the income of the wealthiest 1 per cent grew by 92 per cent (see Wolff 1995). One consequence has been an increase in poverty. In 1996 the US Census reported 14 per cent of the population in poverty: up from 9 per cent in 1972 because of the erosion of welfare programmes.

These inequalities are strongly related to gender and race. So, in 1995 the Census reported that female average earnings were only 58 per cent of male average earnings while black average earnings were 75 per cent and Hispanic 66 per cent of white average earnings.

In the USA structured inequality is also reflected in access to education and political positions. So, in 1996, while 83 per cent of whites had completed 4 years of high school, the same level had been reached by 74 per cent of blacks and only 53 per cent of Hispanics. In education terms the difference between the sexes was negligible. Education was in turn related to income: those without a high school education earned less than half of average earnings. As far as access to positions of political power is concerned, women fare particularly badly in the United States. Women make up only 22 per cent of the membership of State legislatures; there have only been 174 female members of Congress in its history to date; there were 55 female members of the 105th Congress; while the only two women

who have been Supreme Court Justices are currently among the nine incumbents. In racial terms, blacks and Hispanics are also significantly underrepresented at federal level.

In my view then there can be little doubt that there is a persistent structural inequality that is reflected in access to money, knowledge and power; and these are the key resources used in the struggle for political influence. This structural inequality provides actors with various structural possibilities but any explanation of the outcomes must be in terms of both those structural possibilities and the strategic calculations of the actors. In addition, if we are to understand the operation of contemporary capitalism we need to:

- Acknowledge that structured inequality exists.
- Examine how it is reflected in the balance between social forces in society, the resources available to political agents and the institutions and process of governance.
- Recognise that there are a variety of structural constraints that cannot be reduced to one and, although they may reinforce one another, they may also be contradictory.
- Recognise that these are constraints, they are not determinants. As such, agents operate within these constraints but: their knowledge of these constraints is contingent; they have knowledge of a number of different constraints relevant to them; this knowledge is mediated by frames of meaning or discourses; they are reflexive, so the relationship is not mechanical, rather the actors strategically calculate their interests given their knowledge of the constraints; and, finally, agents affect structures.

The main point here is that, while such structural inequalities have always existed, they are more evident in societies like Britain and the USA as a result of the changes of the 1980s and 1990s. Of course, Marxism is not the only theoretical position which can account for the continuance of, and even increase in, structured inequality; radical Weberianism also has much to offer. However, the move away from economism, determinism, materialism and structuralism means that modern Marxists can confront the issue raised here in ways that much mainstream social science finds more difficult.

Conclusion

In my view, Marxism still has a great deal to offer the social scientist. Marxists have continued to confront their critics from within and without that tradition. As such, Marxism is a vibrant and developing tradition; it is

also a broad church and many social scientists engage with Marxism to different extents and in different ways. Marxism remains relevant for three main reasons explored in this chapter:

1. Capitalism still contains significant contradictions. In this way, it claims to be a progressive force at a time when conditions in many parts of the world are getting worse, in large part because of the activities of TNCs and international organisations. In addition, the world financial markets deserve Susan Strange's evocative epithet: we are living in an age of 'casino capitalism'.
2. Capitalism is exploitative as Marx emphasised a century and a half ago. Naomi Klein's work is merely another, if timely, reminder of this exploitation.
3. Nationally and internationally, societies are characterised by massive inequalities.

Of course, Marxism is not the only perspective that focuses on these characteristics of capitalism. However, it does put such issues at the forefront of discussion and can contribute to increased understanding of them.

Further reading

There is an extensive literature on Marxism; this is only a tiny sample to get you started:

- For general reading, Gamble *et al.* (1999) offers a number of chapters about different aspects of Marxist theory.
- On Marx, there are a number of introductory texts such as McLellan (1975) or Fischer (1970). Marx's own work is widely available, the most accessible text is the legendary pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).
- On classical Marxism, try Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (1917).
- For a Marxist critique of economism, see Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* or an introductory text to his thought such as Simon (1982)
- For more recent theoretical work, see Poulantzas (1973), Miliband (1969) or Jessop (1982).

Chapter 8

Normative Theory

STEVE BUCKLER

The roots of normative theory lie in the long history of moral and political philosophy, from the ancient Greeks to the modern day. Since Plato and Aristotle, questions about the best kind of life that can be lived and about the best political order (that would promote that life) have preoccupied political philosophers. The questions at the heart of political philosophy have always seemed to invite a search for ultimate, objective moral reference points, according to which, in turn, critical assessments of our existing political practices and institutions can be made. Of course, as one would expect of a tradition with such a long history, normative theorising of this kind has undergone many changes and crises. One of the most serious of these crises occurred in the mid twentieth century and was sufficiently acute to prompt the suspicion that political philosophy, in anything resembling its traditional form, was no longer viable as a discipline.

In order to gain a sense of where normative theory stands today, it is useful to look at the intellectual basis of this crisis, at the assault mounted upon normative theory in the early twentieth century by the philosophical movement known as 'logical positivism'. We shall then examine some influential alternative accounts of how normative theory might proceed, each of which has contributed to its revival. As we shall see, essential to the logical positivist attack on traditional normative inquiry was a particular set of epistemological assumptions, assumptions about what counts as real knowledge and what can meaningfully be said about the world. Each of the alternatives, in its own way, challenges these assumptions.

Logical positivism and the death of political philosophy

In 1956, the theorist Peter Laslett published an essay in which he argued that political philosophy was dead (Laslett 1956) This view, by no means confined to Laslett, was based upon a sense that the questions animating political philosophy had now been revealed as essentially meaningless.

Questions about the best kind of life or the best political order, inviting objective moral pronouncements, were fundamentally misconceived. They were based upon errors concerning what could count as real or objective knowledge. These errors were pernicious in that they led us into fruitless speculation and nonsensical claims; but they had finally been unmasked by a philosophical movement associated with the term *positivism*.

This term has a range of different, although related, usages referring to doctrines in philosophy, jurisprudence, literary history, theology and, more recently, as outlined elsewhere in this volume, in social science. Of most interest to us here is its manifestation in philosophical form through the movement that became known as *logical positivism* or, sometimes, *logical empiricism*. This theoretical movement (which, as we shall see, was not unconnected with the development of positivist social science) had its origins in the early twentieth century, but drew upon earlier philosophical arguments in order to effect a thoroughgoing reassessment and modification of our understanding of the basis of knowledge. In making this reassessment, the logical positivists consciously aimed to undermine many of the assumptions that had underwritten, amongst other things, the kind of normative theorising embodied in traditional political philosophy.

Logical positivism prioritised the methods of natural science, which sought true knowledge through quantitative measurement of material phenomena and through physical experiments that established facts concerning the behaviour of these phenomena. Its historical reference points were the empiricist theories of knowledge developed, in the light of the emergence of modern science, by philosophers in the eighteenth century. A particular influence was the work of David Hume, arguably 'the real father of positivist philosophy' (Kolakowski 1972: 43).

Challenging what he saw as the speculative nature of traditional philosophy, Hume argued that all our knowledge of the world is actually derived from particular empirical experiences (Hume 1976). Even abstract concepts are derived from generalisations based on sense experience. Thus, true understanding always, ultimately, deals in matters of fact. The only other form of understanding that we can credit concerns the logical relations between the ideas that come from experience: for example, those expressed in mathematics. At the same time, Hume argued, no statement of empirical fact in itself implied a value judgement: sense experience tells us only how the world is and nothing about how we might think it ought to be. Thus, since all true knowledge comes from empirical experience, statements of value could not be said to be in any sense expressions of *knowledge* and were only matters of convention.

Hume's work was consciously iconoclastic and its sceptical, reformist spirit was reproduced in the approach of the logical positivists in the early part of the twentieth century. Building upon the insights of Hume, the

logical positivist approach combined an empiricist view of knowledge with an emphasis upon formal logic, resulting in a method that provided a comprehensive account of the nature of human knowledge and promised to eradicate for good what were seen as the speculative myths and illusions pervading traditional philosophy. The most accessible programmatic statement of the logical positivist position came with A. J. Ayer's famous *Language, Truth and Logic,* first published in 1936 (Ayer 1971).

Ayer proceeds from a rejection of the traditional philosophical distinction between essence and appearance, familiar from the thought of Plato. On that view, the realm of appearances, of sense experience, gives us only fleeting and unreliable knowledge of the world. Beyond this realm, however, lies a realm of essences, embodying the true or ideal nature of things, perceivable only through reason, to which sensorily experienced objects only approximate. This sort of distinction had underwritten the *metaphysical* claims running through much of the history of philosophy, claims for which no sensory evidence can be produced and which rely only on (usually theological) myths or speculations about a 'higher' realm of ultimate truth. Against this Ayer poses a view of knowledge as based upon sense experience and upon generalisations from that experience in the form of ordering concepts. He also affirms the corresponding Humean distinction between fact and value. Since sense experience in itself implies no statements of value, then such statements could not be accorded the status of objective knowledge. Ultimately, they have to be seen purely as expressions of feeling, and, as such, they are not supportable by rational argument. There are no objective standards by which they can be appraised or one judged superior to another. When people engage in meaningful moral debate, Ayer argues, in actuality these debates are reducible to disputes about matters of fact. Where genuine clashes of values occur, no further argument is possible.

Clearly, Ayer's position implies a severe limitation upon the kinds of statements that might qualify as knowledge. Ultimately, the only kinds of statements that can add to our knowledge are factual claims, based on sense experience, that are in principle open to empirical testing and validation. The only other kinds of statements that are meaningful in this respect concern the logical properties of, and relations between, concepts, the generalisations from experience that we use to order and categorise that experience. These statements do not strictly speaking give us knowledge about the world but may tell us something useful about the structure of the concepts that we use. We can dissect the meanings of concepts to see where they are rightly or wrongly applied and how they can be used in relation to other concepts. This marks the limit of meaningful inquiry and notably excluded are statements of value or metaphysical claims based upon supposed experiences of another realm beyond the empirical.

Ayer's argument promised to have profound consequences for philosophy. The traditional metaphysical claims of philosophy were undermined and the questions that such claims were meant to answer, about the nature of 'the good' or about the best kind of life, shown to be pointless. Consequently, a much more limited role was left for the philosopher. Of the two areas of meaningful inquiry that logical positivism admitted, the first, the investigation of empirical experience, could happily be seen as the province of the scientist. The philosopher was left simply to deal with the second area: the investigation into the logical properties of, and relations between, concepts. The job of the philosopher, then, was mainly one of linguistic and analytical clarification, clearing up the conceptual errors and intellectual confusions that historically had inhibited a clear understanding of the world.

Logical positivism exercised a marked influence on philosophy in general and political philosophy in particular. A classic example of political philosophy undertaken in the logical positivist spirit appeared in T. D. Weldon's *The Vocabulary of Politics.* (Weldon 1953). Weldon's work was largely given over to establishing the contention that: 'when verbal confusions are tidied up ... the questions of traditional political philosophy are [shown to be] confused formulations of empirical difficulties' (Weldon 1953: 192). He argues that the metaphysical tendencies of political philosophers have led them into the systematic error of supposing that political concepts such as 'the state', 'freedom' or 'authority' have an essential meaning beyond our empirical experience which it was the purpose of philosophy to discover. The same assumption led to speculative and misleading talk about the 'ideal' form of the state or the 'true' basis of authority. When approached from a positivist point of view, political concepts are 'de-mystified'. Authority, for example, has often been taken to imply some mysterious moral quality that attaches to its possessors, a quality that needs to be explained by reference to some special origin, such as divine right or social contract. In fact, for Weldon, authority is much more clearly characterised as actual or potential use of force combined with general approval, an account which eradicates the need for any metaphysical assumptions. Thus, in its 'clarified' form, authority, like other political concepts, appears as a generalisation from observable social behaviour.

Weldon's method also eradicates the normative content from political philosophy. Like Ayer, he sees value-statements as non-objective and therefore as unsuitable objects for rational inquiry or argument. Recommendations with respect to, say, political institutions can sensibly be made and rationally appraised; but, ultimately, these are only empirical claims about the effectiveness of institutions in realising things that we (happen to) believe valuable. It may be that philosophers have some role in assessing

the logic of such claims, but they have no business, as philosophers, pronouncing on the acceptability of prevalent beliefs as to what is valuable. The role of the political philosopher is consequently vastly curtailed: to clarify political terms in the light of empirical experience and to expose linguistic confusions stemming from metaphysical assumptions.

This revised image of political philosophy had further implications. Whilst positivism made its assault on traditional political philosophy, the study of politics itself was developing in a way that aligned it more clearly with natural-scientific inquiry. The discipline was increasingly understood as 'political science', centring upon behavioural investigations into political conduct. It was through these methods that the real acquisition and furthering of knowledge about the political was seen to be possible. Not only, then, was the scope of political philosophy to be severely limited and most of its central preoccupations abandoned but, also, its disciplinary primacy was transferred to behavioural social science. Political philosophy was, at best, to be seen as a 'handmaiden' to political science: as an exercise in conceptual clarification which cleared the way for political scientists to advance our knowledge. In the light of this, many could plausibly think that, in anything resembling its traditional form, political philosophy was dead and the role of normative theorising in the study of politics undermined. In fact, the obituaries were premature and a number of alternatives emerged which rejected the positivist revision and sought to affirm a more expansive role for normative inquiry in politics.

Interpretive theory

One important ingredient in the philosophical mix out of which logical positivism emerged was the early work of the philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1961). His argument that meaning depended upon a relation between the basic elements of language and direct empirical experience chimed strongly with the preoccupations of the logical positivists. However, in his later work, Wittgenstein took a different view, and one which was to be influential in the development of an important alternative to the positivist approach in social science (Wittgenstein 1972).

Put briefly and in general terms, Wittgenstein came to doubt the possibility of producing the kind of general model of language proposed in his earlier work. When we look at the richness and diversity of language use, there appear to be many quite different modes in which we can speak. This view is summed up in Wittgenstein's famous analogy between language and games. When we consider different modes of language use,

we find that, like games, they have little substantive in common. Whilst any game will depend upon a set of recognised rules that define legitimate play, beyond this, games such as poker, hide and seek and tennis would seem to have little in common; they display only elusive 'family resemblances'. There is no common yardstick that we can apply to games in general. Thus, we cannot say which game is superior, in the sense of being somehow 'more of a game', or closer to some 'ideal game'. For Wittgenstein, a similar diversity exists in language and the meaning attaching to what we say depends upon the rules constituting the particular 'language game' in which we are participating. And each of these has to be taken on its own terms.

Wittgenstein's later thoughts were as challenging to logical positivism as his earlier ones had been accommodating. For logical positivism, language is meaningful when it expresses what we know from our senses. It gains meaning, then, because its basic elements 'map on' to the elements of a prior experiential world. By contrast, for Wittgenstein, language looks to be a way actually of *making* the world 'knowable' and it may do so in any number of different ways. Thus, the logical positivist assumption of a prior set of empirical experiences that are the basis of all true knowledge is flawed. Correspondingly, the analogy of the 'language game' suggests that attempts to eradicate linguistic formations that did not conform to the positivist model were arbitrary and misleading. When looked at in context, many of the linguistic formations criticised as meaningless by the logical positivists appear perfectly meaningful and there would seem to be no good grounds for saying that one of our common ways of making the world intelligible is somehow superior to, or can adequately replace, any other. The 'language games' of religion and science are not commensurable, but neither is there any authentic criterion for saying that one is somehow more 'real' or 'valuable' than the other.

Some of these arguments were taken up and applied specifically to social science methods by the philosopher Peter Winch (Winch 1958). He proceeds from a critique of what he terms the 'underlabourer' conception of philosophy implied in positivism and employed by theorists such as Weldon. This depended on an unconvincing distinction between questions about the 'real world', seen as the province of science, and questions about language, seen as the concern of philosophy. This presupposed a false separation between 'real experience' and the language used to describe or think about it. Drawing on Wittgenstein, he argues that language is not just a way of naming or categorising some independent experiential reality, as if language is wholly subsequent to experience. Without mastery of conceptual frameworks given in language, it is hard to see in what sense we could have meaningful experiences at all. Thus, language 'constitutes' reality for us and investigations into language are investigations into the

world as we experience it. Such investigations are the province of philosophy. There may be various ways in which the world is intelligible to us, through science, art, religion and so on; it is the job of philosophy to explore human understanding and experience in all these modes.

This form of investigation goes beyond linguistic clarification, involving inquiry into forms of social interaction. Wittgenstein's analysis of 'language games' made central the notion of following rules. To use language intelligibly in a particular mode, it is necessary that one follow the rules that govern that mode. Following rules of this sort clearly requires some *understanding* of what they mean, such that one can interpret them and apply them in new situations. But, importantly, such understanding has to be *shared* – imagine playing a board game where, after each move, one's opponent revises, without consistency, the permitted moves for each of the different pieces: in what sense would this really be a *game* and in what sense would the pronouncements of one's opponent really be *rules*? This suggests that an investigation into the different understandings of the world constituted through our language inevitably involves investigating the common understandings of how we go on together and the shared senses of meaning encapsulated in rule-following. For Winch, equally, this is not confined purely to linguistic interactions. Meaningful social behaviour *in general* depends upon shared understandings, beliefs and conceptions reflected in common, constitutive rules; and we can find these in our common practices, institutional arrangements and so forth. Social action, then, can be made intelligible by inquiring into the conceptual structures embedded in the cultural and institutional settings that contextualise conduct and provide people with reasons for acting. Importantly, these structures will contain normative elements.

Against the positivist view, Winch claims social science *for* philosophy. It is, he suggests, an intrinsically philosophical enterprise. By the same token, the positivist view of social science must be flawed. The notion that social reality can be understood through purely empirical investigations into behaviour, which can then be the basis for causal hypotheses and predictive models, ignores the fact that human conduct and social relations are permeated with beliefs and ideas embodied in our language and in the rules defining social life. It ignores, that is, the 'internal' or 'symbolic' character of social relations. Thus, 'the notion of a human society involves a scheme of concepts which is logically incompatible with the kinds of explanations offered in the natural sciences' (Winch 1963: 72).

Winch's model of social scientific investigation aims at *interpretation* rather than causal *explanation*. If we wish, for example, to provide some account of why a person voted in a particular way, the production of detailed statistical information on the relation between voting behaviour and class, occupation, gender and so on does not actually answer the

question. We need to inquire into their *reasons*, which, in turn, will invoke sets of beliefs that they hold. These will include general beliefs about the institution of voting, about its meaning and significance in social life, which are shared in a democratic society and are embodied in the constitutive rules defining the practice of voting. Exploration of these phenomena is the key, on Winch's view, to understanding social life. And they are precisely the phenomena that positivist social science marginalises in favour of empirical generalisations and models of causal prediction, failing to recognise that being able to predict something is not the same as understanding it.

Winch's work continues to be influential. But how much does the interpretive approach achieve in terms of restoring a role for *normative* inquiry in relation to the study of politics? In one sense, clearly, it achieves a great deal. It invites us to take normative language seriously and on its own terms, as part of how the world becomes intelligible to us. As a result, the philosophical analysis of moral language regains some importance. Similarly, it invites us to take seriously the normative force attaching to political concepts. In contrast with Weldon's approach, which sought to recast political concepts as if they were simply generalisations from empirically observed behaviour, we are prompted to accommodate and explore the normative weight carried by such concepts and to consider the role this plays in the construction of an intelligible social life. Weldon was, as we noted, content to elucidate the concept of authority in behavioural terms, as force plus approval. On the interpretive account, one has to take seriously the irreducible normative meaning of this concept, reflecting common beliefs concerning the moral legitimacy and rightful compulsion attaching to the decisions of a properly constituted state, beliefs that are likely to invoke notions such as social contract or natural law, which logical positivism precisely sought to eradicate from our theoretical lexicon.

In another sense, however, the interpretive approach does *not* restore the role of normative inquiry, at least in its previous form. This is because, in a way, it *does* accept one aspect of the positivist critique of metaphysics. Whilst the interpretive approach accepts those 'language games' that invoke theological or other types of metaphysical claims as being as valid as any others in terms of making the world intelligible, and therefore as deserving of philosophical inquiry, it does not restore the place of metaphysics in philosophical inquiry *itself*. The interpretive precept – that the world becomes intelligible through shared, conventional beliefs that do not depend upon any 'deeper' reality – excludes the traditional claim that there are ultimate metaphysical truths beyond appearances. Thus, it is not the job of philosophical inquiry itself to make normative claims of the sort familiar in the history of political philosophy. Its job is to elucidate the

various 'world-views' that a society harbours. Equally, this 'convention-alist' approach would appear to leave interpretive theory with no alternative point of view from which to make *critical* claims that depart from prevailing convention.

This general issue has made itself felt in some of the specific methodological criticisms that have been made of the interpretive approach. Some critics of Winch have taken the view that his approach introduced an undue 'relativism' into social theory. One of the main points of debate here has been the problem, apparently endemic in the interpretive approach, of understanding alien cultural practices. The claim that meaning arises conventionally, embodied in shared beliefs and practices which 'constitute' social reality, implies that to understand the meaning of social action requires that one understands what it means to actors themselves. This casts doubt upon the possibility of understanding those practices with which one is not familiar and which might contain meanings absent from one's own culture (see Winch 1972). Further, if all meanings, including normative ones, are internal to a culture, it becomes difficult to erect 'objective' or 'external' standards by which to judge any aspects of a particular culture as unacceptable.

A related point emerges concerning the marginalising of *explanatory* approaches. In a notable critique of Winch, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the privileging of interpretive over explanatory approaches unduly limits what the social theorist is able to do (MacIntyre 1973). For MacIntyre, Winch's view that explanations based on causes and interpretations based on reasons are mutually exclusive is flawed. Winch may be correct to say that we need to look at the beliefs that social actors harbour and espouse, and the reasons for acting that these provide. However, this can only be the start of an investigation; after all, it does not tell us why some beliefs and reasons compel us whilst others do not. So we then need to look at the social circumstances under which certain kinds of reasons and the rules to which they refer become operative in determining action. This may also mean looking for rules that might operate without the conscious acknowledgement of actors. This further type of investigation restores to the social theorist the possibility of talking about factors such as ideology or false consciousness and of distinguishing between cases in which aspects of the social structure could be thought controlling or constraining and cases where they are not.

These aspects of inquiry have, in turn, been seen as vital if political philosophy, whilst eschewing the more ambitious metaphysical armoury of earlier times, is to prove capable of *making* compelling critical claims, rather than just elucidating the beliefs that people conventionally espouse. Theorising this possibility has been central to the project of another prominent alternative to positivism: that provided by critical theory.

Critical theory and dialectics

The term 'critical theory' has been associated with a strand of thinking originating in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century. It was closely tied to the work of the Institute for Social Research, established in Frankfurt in 1923. The theorists associated with the Institute maintained strong affinities with Marxism and their work was in large part directed by the perceived need to rethink the Marxian approach. Marx's predictions concerning the imminent overthrow of capitalism by a proletarian revolution had failed to come true and this seemed to cast doubt on his whole method.

Central to Marx's critique had been a theory of *dialectical* historical change, the central premise of which was that social transformation occurs not as the result of the effects of some 'external' agency upon the social structure (for no such external agent exists) but rather as a result of contradictions *within* the totality of social relations, expressed in class antagonisms. Thus, in modern society, capitalism creates and depends upon a mass industrial workforce, but at the same time, ultimately, it cannot meet the most basic needs of that group. The result, Marx predicted, would be a proletarian revolution. Capitalism, in this sense, creates its own 'gravediggers'. Corresponding with this analysis is a distinctive, dynamic theory of knowledge. In any era, there will be a dominant understanding of the world, which answers objectively to socio-economic reality. But as that reality becomes contradictory, contending world-views arise; and since these contradictions are expressed in class antagonisms, the contending world-views will answer to the outlook and interests of contending classes. The established world-view comes to be flawed, marginalising aspects of a changing world, and ideological, preserving an order that served the interests of the ruling class. The new world-view acknowledges dynamic aspects of social reality and confirms the interests of the exploited.

At a methodological level, the point of this analysis, and what made it truly *dialectical*, was that a radical critique of capitalism could be undertaken not on the basis of speculative metaphysical principles, derived from conceptions of human nature or abstract theories of 'the good', but rather on the basis of an analysis of real structural dynamics. The alternative by reference to which existing social relations are criticised is not some utopian dream but is anticipated in those very social relations.

Clearly, however, if the proletariat had failed to make the predicted radical turn, then the dialectical method and the related assumptions as to the historical basis of knowledge all came into question. Early critical theorists were concerned to investigate the circumstances under which radicalism had receded. Amongst other things, it seemed that powerful

ideological forces had succeeded, to an extent unforeseen by Marx, in reconciling people to the imperatives of capitalism and much critical attention was given to studying ideology. One such study, by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, linked modern ideology with positivism (Horkheimer and Adorno 1979).

They argue that positivism, not just as a philosophical movement but as a world-view, has risen to become a dominant ideology. Promising human liberation, both intellectual and material, though the application of scientific or technical rationality, it in fact insinuates a deeply disempowering vision. The scientific outlook sees the world as made up of impersonal, causal mechanisms. When this is applied to social life, it portrays human beings as trapped within social mechanisms and processes, in a world devoid of ethical value. It is the vision presupposed in modern positivist social science: mankind is portrayed as wholly at the mercy of the ends dictated by the 'natural laws' of society, with no independent moral standpoint from which to criticise that society. This portrayal corresponds with and legitimates the real experience of modern mankind, governed by the laws of commodity exchange which constitute the impersonal mechanism of the capitalist market.

The problem here, which Horkheimer and Adorno never satisfactorily resolved, was that the success of this ideology in reconciling people to the current system was such as to erase contradictions and so to eliminate any objective dynamic of social change. Where such progressive tendencies lapsed, the dialectical demand that critique be based on actual dynamics of change could not be met and criticism becomes purely utopian.

The problem of grounding a normative critique has continued to preoccupy critical theory. A range of attempts have been made to resolve it, the most notable in recent times being found in one aspect of the extensive work of Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1979, 1990, 1991). Whilst he agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno on the dangers of privileging technical rationality as positivist ideology does, he disagrees with the idea that this ideology is (or can be) so dominant that no understanding other than the technical and empirical is available. We can and do understand the world through shared norms or conventions of the sort emphasised by interpretive theorists (although these are vulnerable to 'colonisation' by technical imperatives). But there is another perspective that goes beyond particular norms and conventions, reflecting something more universal about the human condition. Central to the human condition for Habermas is a form of rationality that is not technical but is embodied in our capacity for rational debate over matters of principle. Because it is central to our humanity, this rational capacity commits us to living in a particular kind of way if we are to be true to that humanity. This form of rationality is evident in how we communicate.

In brief, Habermas argues that, whenever we use language, we implicitly commit ourselves to certain key criteria. These criteria consist of truth, sincerity, moral appropriateness and intelligibility. They are built into the very nature of language; without them, all language use would lose its point. Thus, even if one is telling a lie, one implicitly commits oneself to the criterion of truth since, without a general commitment to truth, all attempts at linguistic communication, whether true or false, would be pointless. Further, people committed to criteria of this sort are equally committed to the possibility of genuinely free, open and rational communication, by means of which our adherence to those criteria is best examined and ensured.

Habermas encapsulates this in the image of what he terms the 'ideal speech situation'. In this situation, communication is free from 'distortions' in the sense of being free from any subterfuge, hidden agendas, biases or arbitrary closure; the discussion is genuinely rational, guided by the force of the better argument alone. By the same token, it is a situation where all participants have an equal chance to speak, to make an argument or express a point of view. The guiding principle of such communication is the goal of rational consensus. For Habermas, this ideal is not an arbitrary or speculative one: again, it is built into the very logic of language use and all communication both presupposes and anticipates it. It is the source of what he terms 'emancipatory knowledge', through which social critique is possible.

Of course, much of our communication will, to some extent, contain distortions that remove it from the ideal. More important, for Habermas, is the fact that some communication may be *systematically* distorted. Here, he elevates the model of a particular discussion to a more general level, invoking what we might think of as the 'social conversation', in which political principles or prevailing moral norms are articulated and reproduced. At this level, we can identify systematic distortions: where, for example, discussion is consistently repressive, curtailing the acknowledgement of certain forms of experience and self-understanding, or is consistently exclusionary, marginalising some voices or points of view. This identification of systematic distortions allows us to expose ideological biases, which in turn can be linked to prevailing configurations of power and to the structural impact of dominant socio-economic interests.

Equally, whilst this approach does not tell us what moral decisions a society should make, it does lay down requirements as to how such things should be debated, establishing the moral necessity for things like constitutional guarantees of rights, participatory democratic procedures, collective control of elites and so forth. In methodological terms, for Habermas, empirical and interpretive analyses have their place but neither can be the exclusive provider of insight into social reality. Empirical/causal

analysis gives us information about the structural and behavioural elements making up the routinised aspects of life, principally in terms of the world of labour and production. Interpretation can give us insight into the shared norms that structure symbolic social interaction. But these forms of knowledge need to be placed in conjunction with emancipatory knowledge, which provides a standard by which to judge our shared norms and criticise the social structure that underlies them. Thus, returning to the example of political authority we deployed in the previous sections, whilst interpretive methods are valuable in illuminating the shared meanings and normative force contained in our conception of political authority, critical theory takes things further. It asks whether our conception of authority might embody symbolic meanings that betoken repression or exclusion when compared with what we might expect from an (albeit hypothetical) open, inclusive and rational debate about that concept and its implications. In turn, if evidence of such systematic distortion is found, this can be related to empirical analysis and causal hypotheses concerning the underlying socio-economic processes to which a flawed conception of authority might answer. Such an analysis can be directly related to demands for social change.

In one sense, it might be said that Habermas has restored a form of dialectical criticism. The ideal by which we criticise situations involving distorted communication is not arbitrary or utopian; it is anticipated in the act of communication itself. At the same time, however, Habermas's thought clearly takes a long step away from Marxism: whilst he is committed to the possibility of emancipatory knowledge – critical knowledge beyond the merely empirical or the conventional – it is not clear that, as in the case of Marx, this knowledge is historically conditioned and related to class struggle.

Arguably, Habermas's thought owes more to the tradition of *deontological* theory. In other words, it seeks to affirm general ethical principles, establishing rights and duties that hold true regardless of particular contexts or consequences and which are justified by reference to certain fundamental aspects of the human condition. Characteristically, modern deontological theories ground objective, normative claims not in supposed metaphysical truths, but in the conditions making possible the operation of human faculties, making us intelligent, communicating beings. Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, unearthing the conditions making language-use possible, arguably embodies this kind of approach.

Indeed, some of Habermas's critics have focused upon this current in his thinking, arguing that his communicative ethics reintroduces in a new form a metaphysical theory of universal human nature, which justifies the imposition of a single (questionable) moral vision. Habermas has pointed out that his theory should not be seen as *monological*: it does not provide a

formula which produces rational solutions to normative questions. Rather, it is only as a result of *actual* free and open dialogue that decisions could be said to embody a rational consensus, and such dialogue must be inclusive. So, his critical theory *does* make appeal to a universal rationality, but this *conditions* free debate rather than *preempting* it. However, some critics have insisted that the model of free and open dialogue invoked by Habermas will not be properly inclusive, employing as it does a model of rational argumentation that is *logocentric* and potentially exclusionary with respect to some voices. This kind of criticism has been made, for example, by some feminists, who have argued that the logocentric model embodies an image of rationality that is male in orientation.

We will return to these issues in the next section. Significantly, the deontological elements detectable in Habermas's work have been in part responsible for placing it more squarely in the mainstream of contemporary debate in normative theory than previous formulations of critical theory have been. Issues surrounding deontological approaches and the problems created by the idea of a single moral vision have served to thematise the dominant contemporary debate.

Deontological theory and value pluralism

An early and prescient response to the positivist proclamation of the death of political theory came in an essay by Isaiah Berlin published in 1962 (Berlin 1980). Berlin argues against the logical positivist reduction of meaningful inquiry to either the empirical or the purely logical. There are many questions that apparently resist being answered in either of these ways. Of these, the most resistant to reductionist treatment are those that involve value-judgements and that are typical of moral and political philosophy – questions such as: 'what is justice?' The claim that these questions have been shown to be meaningless (unless reformulated as purely empirical) is undermined, Berlin argues, by the fact that people go on asking them, prompted by what seems to be an authentic sense of puzzlement. There is a reason for this: when it comes to normative questions, there will never be settled agreement and so they can never be treated as if they can be answered in terms of objective fact. We inhabit a world of value-pluralism, where irreducible differences exist between the configurations of values to which people subscribe.

It should be noted that Berlin's argument in no way entails a complete 'relativism', such that a person could choose *any* set of ends or principles and expect us to accept them as simply being his or her own value-system. Human communities *do* recognise *particular* sets of ends or principles as being authentically of value, even if these vary somewhat according to time

and place. So it is not a matter of wholly open, arbitrary choice. However, for Berlin, these authentically valuable ends and principles are themselves always likely to conflict (consider, for example, the values of liberty and equality). As a result, no one value-system can incorporate *all* that is valuable and any such system will prioritise some values and relegate or reinterpret others. As a result, there will always be competing value-systems to which people adhere, even within the same community at the same point in time, and there is no objective criterion by which we could decide which system is right. Value-systems are essential to the 'models' through which people see the world and themselves; they embody deeply-held convictions. Philosophy has a permanent task in elucidating and appraising these different models, and since value-pluralism will not go away, neither will philosophy.

Now it might be thought that a recognition of value-pluralism, and therefore of irreconcilable moral disagreement, presents a problem specifically for *political* philosophy. Traditionally, it has been the aim of political philosophy to theorise forms of moral and political *consensus,* capable of underwriting a just and stable political order, an aim reproduced in interpretive or critical forms in the more recent alternatives we have examined so far in this chapter. Acceptance of pluralism might seem to call into question this aim. Berlin's response here is to affirm the desirability of a liberal society. The recognition of value-pluralism is itself, at a general level, an intrinsic good, and liberal societies best embody this recognition. Berlin's thought presaged what have become the central elements of contemporary debate in normative theory: the challenges presented by a recognition of value-pluralism and the possibilities of justifying a liberal order.

The American political philosopher John Rawls has made the most important and influential contribution here (Rawls 1973, 1996). Rawls seeks to theorise a conception of justice, suitable to governing political communities, in the light of irreconcilable moral disagreement. His argument is deontological, affirming a fundamental ethical principle that is independent of contexts and consequences and is grounded in basic conditions governing human experience. He deploys an account of the basic conditions and implications of people's rational autonomy in order to develop a theory of social justice grounded in *fairness*.

Here, we can only summarise in very brief terms a very sophisticated argument. Drawing on the tradition of 'contract theory', whereby a particular political arrangement is justified by showing that rational individuals, given the choice, would choose *that* arrangement, Rawls develops a rational choice model. He invokes a hypothetical 'original position', where persons are asked to choose principles of justice to govern the basic institutional structure of society. The choice is constrained only

by the requirement that people are not biased in their own favour, a requirement represented in the rational choice model by the absence of personal information about their own particular interests and commitments. This constraint is justified, Rawls argues, because it embodies a recognition of the moral implications of the fact that all individuals are alike in that they are capable of rational autonomy: others, like oneself, possess the potential to formulate and pursue independent plans of life and act autonomously upon them, and, consequently, others merit the same respect that one wishes for oneself. This answers our most basic moral intuition about what is fair, the one moral intuition we can safely say that all people have and that applies to everyone. When we are thinking about the basic structure of society, this implies that what I want for myself, I should want for others too; the lack of knowledge of particular interests or commitments in the 'original position' ensures this.

Rawls deduces the principles that would be chosen in this situation, and they have strong normative implications. People would choose principles that require the maximisation of basic liberties, combined with a redistributive state that would ensure that everyone, and particularly the less well-off, benefit from the system. For Rawls, these principles encapsulate true social justice and they are, he believes, *necessarily* the ones that rational people would choose. It does not matter whether one person or a million people were placed in the 'original position', the result would be the same. This is so because we all share the capacity for rational autonomy and this confers upon us the same sense of what it is we want, at the most *basic* level, out of society, regardless of how we differ in terms of our wants and beliefs at a more *particular* level. What we all want from society is the best possible provision of the most basic conditions allowing us to pursue our own chosen aspirations in life, whatever these happen to be. A society governed by these principles could legitimately demand obedience from its citizenry. Its principles are ones that all (rational) citizens would choose for themselves should they be asked to make an (unbiased) choice.

Rawls's work has had a marked influence on contemporary political theory and has contributed decisively to the reemergence of normative thinking, of the search for foundational moral principles that provide an objective ideal against which to judge our political arrangements. Does his approach, then, mark a return to the kind of ambitious 'foundationalist' theorising characteristic of the history of normative theory, proposing a set of axiomatic precepts that establish a universal moral vision? Rawls argues that his theory of justice concerns only basic institutional arrangements and precisely avoids imposing any unitary moral vision upon society. His rational choice method, as we noted, invites people (hypothetically) to choose principles governing the basic structure of society whilst being

ignorant of their own particular interests and particular beliefs. These constraints imply that principles of justice cannot be influenced by such particular interests or particular sets of moral and spiritual beliefs. The theory, then, precisely embodies an acknowledgement that people disagree fundamentally in their 'conceptions of the good' and the principles of justice reflect no such particular conception. In this sense, Rawls argues, his theory embodies principles of 'the right' rather than 'the good'; it is based on a minimal claim about what people have in common (their autonomous, rational self-interest) and aims only at providing principles that would fairly regulate the interactions of people who differ profoundly in terms of how they wish to lead their lives. Thus, for Rawls, his theory of justice, whilst taking a 'foundationalist' approach, does so in a way that is more modest and consequently less contestable than are the approaches taken in older forms of political philosophy. It depends upon some knowledge claims about human beings, but these do not derive from some metaphysical realm for which 'insight' rather than evidence is the only basis and by reference to which questions about the best life can be resolved. Rather, they derive from inferences concerning what is pre-supposed in the very basic experiences that we all have. And furthermore, the basic experience referred to here is that of autonomy, which implies the capacity to formulate independent 'conceptions of the good'.

Nevertheless, the kind of approach taken by Rawls and other con-temporary liberal theorists has been subject to a variety of criticisms. One strand of criticism aimed at deontological liberalism is that associated with a *communitarian* standpoint. On this view, theories of justice such as that developed by Rawls fail on two related counts. First, in delivering authoritative principles that are minimal, governing only the 'impersonal' terms of institutional interaction, such theories assume that human societies embody no shared substantial conceptions of the good or forms of ethical solidarity. Such a view, it is argued, is erroneous and may even be dangerous in so far as it perpetuates a corrosive belief that individuals are 'strangers', with nothing profound binding them together as a community. This is related to a second, deeper problem. Theorists like Rawls miss elements of ethical solidarity because they are looking in the wrong place: they still harbour the desire to ground their deontological principles in foundational knowledge, in some universalistic claims about the human condition; but recognising that grand, substantive claims of this sort (such as those stemming from theological or natural law theories) are now unconvincing, they resort to a much more minimal account of what persons have in common as a basis for normative principles. They see the universal characteristics of human beings as reducible simply to rational self-interest and nothing more substantial. If, communitarians argue, we abandon the search for foundations, and look instead more closely at the role communities play in constituting the common identity of individuals and conferring upon them common beliefs, we would arrive at a more convincing account of human societies and of the normative principles that particular societies embody.

In this vein, in a notable critique of Rawls, Michael Sandel argues that the emphasis upon the 'unencumbered self', the individual shorn of a social context, as a source of foundational claims about human beings, is misplaced and, further, that it does not provide a sound basis upon which to make claims about social obligations (Sandel 1982). The sorts of social principles that Rawls wishes to affirm, such as redistribution to the less well-off, are hard to justify if one starts from the premise of the self-interested individual with no intrinsic social ties: one is always likely to be vulnerable to more libertarian critics who will argue that if individual autonomy is the axiomatic principle, then requiring of people that they contribute to collective welfare is unacceptable (Nozick 1974). In this sense more ambitious moral claims can be made about social obligations if one is less ambitious in seeking universal principles of human nature and concentrates instead upon the consensual norms and shared obligations that help constitute our identity.

Communitarians, then, accept that it is certainly possible to theorise forms of moral consensus that ground authoritative normative principles. But these forms of consensus are based not upon claims about the substantive nature of the human individual. They are based instead upon a recognition that how individuals construe themselves, and so what is normatively compelling for them, depends upon the norms and conven-tions of the community to which they belong.

The debate between deontological liberalism and communitarianism has been subtle and sustained. But there is a further important strand of thinking here, one which would share the suspicion of universalist foundations but which would also reject the communitarian emphasis upon collective cultural and social identity. It is a strand of thinking associated with a *postmodern* perspective.

On this view, broadly, foundational theories confer upon a particular set of claims about, or perspectives upon, the human condition a trans-historical universality that is unwarranted. Such claims or perspectives are always partial; where they are elevated to universal status, they promise a premature closure of available ways of seeing the world and a correspondingly foreclosed set of moral and political prescriptions. By exercising this kind of foreclosure, it is suggested, universalist foundational approaches are essentially oppressive: on the basis of supposed universal claims, they seek to impose one normative perspective, answering to one set of experiences, cultural outlook or sense of identity, marginalising those based upon other experiences or construals of identity. Even in

modest form, asserting the 'right' rather than the 'good', deontological theory is not equipped to acknowledge the full implications of pluralism. Modern societies, it is argued, are composed of multiple social, cultural, ethnic and sexual groupings displaying divergent identities and commitments. Thus, even the way we construe the most basic experiences that go to make up or define who and what we are is contingent and negotiable. Consequently, claims to foundational knowledge about the most minimal aspects of what it means to be (before anything else) 'simply a human being', are questionable. In retaining its minimal commitment to foundational knowledge, deontological liberalism risks emasculating this diversity and fluidity of human identities.

At the same time, on a postmodern view, the communitarian emphasis upon the conventional basis of identity is misplaced. Whilst it does not make the mistake of asserting a universal human identity, by supposing that communities embody shared norms and reference points that shape the common identity of their members, communitarianism makes a different error. It is true that dominant conceptual frameworks and discourses in a society shape identities, but this process tends to establish forms of opposition as well as commonality. Dominant images of identity are established in contrast with alternatives that are seen as 'other' or alien. As a result, identities tend to be falsely fixed or simplified and some will be marginalised or regarded as antagonistic to the norm. On this view, communitarianism ignores the diversity and negotiability of identities and in doing so implies social and political prescriptions that are potentially more oppressive than those offered by liberals.

For postmodernism, the rejection of foundational knowledge presents profound challenges to our political thought and practice, and these cannot be sidestepped by reference to an anachronistic vision of cultural and spiritual unity. Instead, these challenges have to be met by theorising and embracing a more profoundly pluralistic form of politics, based less upon prior agreement and more upon the articulation of a multiplicity of identities (Mouffe 1993; Phillips 1993). The political emphasis here is upon the articulation and negotiation of *difference*. The reliance upon fixed and agreed procedures in a clearly-defined political realm, characteristic of traditional political frameworks (even liberal ones), tends to promote a regulation of difference that contributes to the fixing of static and limited senses of identity and to the marginalising of the 'other'. The alternative image is one of a more broadly conceived, radically participatory political arena, providing the space for the articulation of difference and the reshaping and expression of fluid identities. It is a politics of disruption and renegotiation where the terms of political life are themselves always at issue: values such as freedom and equality remain central but their meaning needs to be open to constant contestation. How far one can go

in 'decentring' human identity, and how far the corresponding 'agonistic' form of politics is plausible, remain matters of strong debate.

It is worth noting that these debates engage some of the central substantive social issues of recent times. Feminist writers, for example, have made strong contributions to discussion in contemporary political theory. Some feminists have regarded a liberal framework as the most appropriate context in which to raise issues of gender. Modern liberal societies have provided a context for the creation of equal political rights and progress on equality of access to distributive shares in society through, for example, opportunity and employment laws. Other feminists, however, have questioned the suitability of a liberal framework in this respect. In attempting to find consensus in a pluralistic setting, liberals have tended to focus on issues of rights and distributive justice, assuming that the expression of broader moral perspectives or world-views can be left to the realm of the personal or private. This, it is argued, may unduly limit the scope of what is negotiable politically. Thus, whilst liberal societies might be effective in securing political equality and formal rights for women, they may be much less effective in addressing deeper, more implicit forms of social disadvantage or oppression to which women might be seen as subject. Furthermore, the image of what we have in common underlying liberal justice is an image of the rational self-interested individual which, for some feminists, as we saw earlier, is highly 'logocentric' and male in conception. As a result, the liberal vision may exclude the alternative perspectives and preoccupations of women and collude with the historical banishment of women's experiences and interests to the private or domestic sphere (Pateman 1988; Young 1990).

In view of this, many feminists have adopted a perspective that is more postmodernist in orientation, placing a greater emphasis upon a politics of difference. This, it is argued, would permit a renegotiation of the distinction between the public and the private and would subvert dominant images of human nature, permitting the more effective articulation of the experiences of women and the identification of implicit forms of oppression.

Equally, debates in political theory have chimed strongly with contemporary issues surrounding multiculturalism. Liberals have tended to see the rational consensus they seek to establish as providing a suitable framework of agreement within which different cultural groups can coexist, harbouring their own particular 'conceptions of the good' in a context of mutual respect underwritten by fair procedures and equal rights (Kymlicka 1995). The agreement over justice that liberalism theorises is also, at the same time, an agreement to disagree over other moral, cultural or spiritual matters and therefore embodies a fundamental principle of tolerance. Others, however, have seen this approach as inadequate.

Liberalism, it is argued, is complacent in assuming that this sort of rational consensus is an effective principle in a highly culturally diverse society and, further, that it fails to address the ways in which minority groups can be marginalised and be caricatured in a way that brands them as a threatening 'other'. Again, here, a more postmodern perspective has tended to emerge, affirming the need for a radically pluralist politics that would permit the constant renegotiation of the political issues raised by cultural diversity and the more effective articulation of complex cultural identities (Phillips 1993). In turn, some writers more inclined to a communitarian view have emphasised the fundamental importance of collective cultural identity, a factor which both deontological liberalism (with its emphasis upon personal choice) and postmodernism (with its emphasis upon fluid identities) may treat too lightly. Such a reemphasis is needed, it is suggested, if we are to appreciate fully what might be involved in protecting minority cultures (Taylor 1992).

The theoretical debates we have looked at in this section relate closely, then, to key social issues of our time. And they are debates that look set to develop and remain vigorous. It is worth emphasising also that none of the perspectives recognising value-pluralism that we have examined implies anything like a moral nihilism, whereby the possibility of asserting and arguing about authoritative normative claims is denied. They all, in one way or another, carry implications for how we might best and most justly arrange our common affairs. The differences concern the nature and scope of what can be said in this area and what kinds of knowledge claims underlie this. Even the more radically pluralist standpoints invoke *some* kinds of claims to knowledge about the human condition, if not about human *nature* as such. The possibility, therefore, of making compelling normative claims about our political and social arrangements remains central to the debate.

Conclusion

The various responses to the logical positivist challenge that we have surveyed in this chapter point to the continued health of normative theory. The debates surrounding deontological liberalism and value-pluralism provide the dominant contemporary themes; although it is worth noting that the preoccupations we examined in relation to interpretive and critical theory have had a lasting impact. The emphasis upon linguistically embedded norms and the constitutive nature of conceptual frameworks continues to be felt in terms of the universal recognition of the importance in politics of the discursive conditions under which norms arise (whatever their scope or consistency). The questioning of technical forms of

rationality and the quest in critical theory for standards of rationality above and beyond the purely instrumental is echoed in modern deontological theory and in the general recognition of the value of non-instrumental political norms.

In general, then, normative theory has continued to maintain both its intellectual vigour and its social relevance. At the same time, the debates we have looked at do also suggest that one aspect of the logical positivist view (although not one confined to that view) has had an impact. The assertion of absolute metaphysical truths as a basis for normative claims is now regarded with greater suspicion. This is evident in the strong influence that anti-foundationalism has had upon recent political philosophy. And, as we have seen, even those who maintain a foundationalist approach tend to frame it in more modest terms, eschewing the grand moral vision and recognising value-pluralism. This indicates a greater reflexivity or self-consciousness with respect to what can be said in political philosophy, reflected in greater concern about how ambitious normative claims can be and about the basis and scope of their justification.

Equally, this sense of circumspection may lead us to suppose that the debates we have looked at, whilst they will evolve, are not likely to be resolved by arrival at some final, authoritative answer. But this might only confirm Isaiah Berlin's contention that normative theory is an ongoing and ineradicable aspect of our continuing attempts to understand the world.

Further reading

- Some useful general works on themes in recent political philosophy are Kymlicka (1990), Plant (1991), Goodin and Pettit (1993) and Ashe *et al.* (1999).
- A notable historical and theoretical account of logical positivism is Kolakowski (1972).
- A series of re-assessments of Peter Winch's work can be found in the special issue of *History of the Human Sciences* (2000), vol. 13, no.1.
- For some considerations on the application of an interpretive approach, see Taylor (1971).
- On the general issue of relativism in social science, see Hollis and Lukes (1982).
- Jay (1973) is a comprehensive history of the Institute for Social Research and a useful introduction to critical theory is Held (1982). Introductions to the work of Habermas are McCarthy (1984), White (1988) and Outhwaite (1994). Collections of critical literature around Habermas's work can be found in Thompson and Held (1982) and Dews (1999). See also Meehan (1995).

- Aside from Rawls, some important contributions to contemporary liberalism are Raz (1986) and Dworkin (1981a/b). Critical collections on the work of Rawls are Kukathas and Pettit (1990) and Daniels (1978). Nozick (1974) is a critique of the Rawlsian approach from a libertarian point of view.
- Notable communitarian works are Sandel (1982), Walzer (1983) and Taylor (1989). Important contributions to the liberal–communitarian debate are collected in Sandel (1984) and in Avineri and de Shalit (1992). See also Gutmann (1985). The debate is analysed by Mulhall and Swift (1996) and a feminist perspective is provided in Frazer (1993).
- Notable works from a postmodern perspective are Lyotard (1984) and Rorty (1980). More specifically on questions of identity and difference in relation to political theory see Connolly (1991), Mouffe (1993), Honig (1993) and Phillips (1995).
- A useful collection on liberalism and pluralism is Bellamy and Hollis (1999).
- Important feminist contributions to contemporary debate include Pateman (1988), Okin (1989) and Young (1990). A useful collection on multiculturalism is Gutmann (1994).

PART II

METHODS

Chapter 9

Qualitative Methods

FIONA DEVINE

Qualitative methods is a generic term that refers to a range of techniques including observation, participant observation, intensive individual interviews and focus group interviews which seek to understand the experiences and practices of key informants and to locate them firmly in context. More often than not, researchers use two or more of these techniques in the field and research that draws on these techniques is usually referred to as ethnographic research or an ethnography (Lareau and Shultz 1996: 3). This chapter is divided into four parts. First, it looks at the role of qualitative methods in the social sciences in general and political science in particular. Second, it considers the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research. Third, it evaluates criticisms that are often levelled against qualitative research. Fourth, it discusses a recent example of qualitative research on electoral volatility at the 1997 general election by the author and her colleagues (White et al. 1999). Overall, it will be argued that the use of qualitative methods in political science has made an important contribution to our understanding of political phenomena and explanations of them. Some political scientists are reluctant to acknowledge the importance of qualitative methods to the discipline. They doubt the value of qualitative techniques and the need to be reflexive about issues of method in the discipline. Fortunately, there are others who recognise the advantages of qualitative research and are more reflective about issues of method. Empirical research in political science is moving in this direction.

The role of qualitative methods in political science

Qualitative methods have played a major, albeit understated, role in political science, from the study of individuals and groups inside the formal political arena to the political attitudes and behaviour of people (be they voters or members of elites) outside it. It is no coincidence, however, that it is a sociologist (albeit one that retains a long-held interest in political science) who is the author of this chapter since the origins of different qualitative techniques lie in sociology and anthropology. Participant observation was first used in anthropology to study other cultures (Powermaker 1966; Spradley 1980; Wax 1971). It involves the

researcher immersing himself or herself in the social setting in which they are interested, observing people in their usual milieu and participating in their activities. On this basis, the researcher writes extensive field notes. The participant observer depends upon relatively long-term relationships with informants, whose conversations are an integral part of field notes (Lofland and Lofland 1985: 12). They are the 'raw data' that are analysed, and the interpretation of the material forms the basis of a research report. More recently, participant observation has been used by sociologists including Roseneil's (1995) chronicle of the experience of women involved in the Greenham peace camp in the UK and Eliasoph's study (2000) of civic groups – recreation club members, volunteers and activists – and how they avoid talking politics in the USA.

However, it has been more common for sociologists (and, as we shall see, political scientists) to use intensive interviewing techniques rather than participant observation. In-depth interviewing is based on an interview guide, open-ended questions and informal probing to facilitate a discussion of issues in a semi-structured or unstructured manner. The interview guide is used as a checklist of topics to be covered, although the order in which they are discussed is not preordained (Bryman 1988: 66). Open-ended questions are used to allow the interviewee to talk at length on a topic. Finally, various forms of probing are used to ask the interviewee to elaborate on what they have said (Fielding 1993a: 140–1). Intensive interviews are, then, 'guided conversations' (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 9). Such lengthy interviews are usually conducted with only a small sample of informants. The transcriptions constitute the data that are analysed and interpreted. Interviewers also engage in observing the interviewee and the setting in which they are found and these observations facilitate the interpretation of the material. In contrast to the highly structured interview used in survey research, based on a tightly defined questionnaire and closed questions, intensive interviews are open and flexible, allowing the informants to elaborate on their values and attitudes and account for their actions (Mann 1985; Brenner *et al.* 1985). For example, McAdam's (1988) in-depth interviews with volunteers who went to Mississippi to register black voters in 1964 – the Freedom Summer project – captures the voices and experiences of the American civil rights movement.

Finally, academic researchers are increasingly undertaking focus group interviews, although the technique is still most closely associated with opinion poll organisations and the politicians who use them (Barbour and Kitzinger 1998). Note, for example, the frequent (and often disparaging) reference in newspapers to Tony Blair's use of focus group research findings to define new issues and devise new policies! The technique involves intensive discussion about a set of issues with a small group of

people (say 10–12 participants). The main advantage of focus group interviews over individual interviews is that participants interact in a discussion on a particular topic, agree with other interviewees in some respects and disagree in others and raise new issues and concerns. It is the interaction between all the participants in a quasi-naturalistic setting – that is, not too far removed from everyday group conversations – that is unique to the method (Maynard 1998). The discussions are usually either tape-recorded or extensive notes are taken which are then subject to different forms of analysis (like those associated with individual interviews). The transcripts or notes may also be subject to conversation analysis which involves a very detailed examination of what people say, how they say it, how they respond to other people's reactions and so forth. Focus group discussions have been used, for example, by Gamson (1992) in the USA to consider the process of opinion formation, how people deal with media information, and how they draw on their own experiences in life and also those of people they know in talking politics. He argues that people are able to conduct informed and reasoned discussions about political issues and have a political consciousness often dismissed by opinion pollsters.

From this brief description of qualitative methods, it should be clear that they are most appropriately employed where the *goal* of research is to explore people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. Intensive interviewing, for example, allows people to talk freely and offer their interpretation of events. It is their perspective that is paramount (Harvey 1990). Qualitative methods are also good at tapping into the thought processes or narratives that people construct. In-depth interviews allow people to tell their own story in language with which they are familiar. Where the discussion of issues flows naturally it is possible to understand the logic of an interviewee's argument and the associative thinking that led them to particular conclusions. Finally, qualitative methods draw particular attention to contextual issues, placing an interviewee's attitudes and behaviour in the context of their individual biography and the wider social setting. This is sometimes referred to as a holistic approach. Qualitative methods, therefore, are good at capturing meaning, process and context (Bryman 1988: 62; Rose 1982). Inevitably, research of this kind is very labour-intensive, especially when fieldwork is conducted over a long period of time, and it not surprising that researchers usually concentrate on a small group of people. It is the meaning of a particular practice – say, not voting at an election – that is important to qualitative researchers rather than the frequency of abstention that concerns quantitative researchers.

Qualitative methods have been employed across a number of sub-fields of political science since participants in the world of politics have been willing to talk about their involvement in groups, their role in formal

positions of power, their views about the political system and so on. Political scientists, for example, have frequently interviewed pressure group activists (Grant and Marsh 1977; Mills 1993). Members of political parties and party officials have interviewed extensively about developments in party organisation, strategy and so forth (Seyd 1987; Whiteley 1983). While previous work in the UK focused on the Labour Party, recent research on party membership has extended to the Conservatives as well (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley *et al.* 1994). The prize-winning book on the rise and fall of the Social Democratic Party by Crewe and King (1995) draws on many interviews with a wide variety of people. No doubt observations and so forth played a very important part of their analysis too since both authors were involved in the early days of the SDP and their involvement must have shaped their insights into the momentous events of the 1980s. Qualitative methods have been used extensively in the study of local politics in Britain (Gyford *et al.* 1984; Lowndes and Stoker 1992; Maloney *et al.* 2000). Until recently, qualitative methods were rarely used in research on central government because of limited access to the seemingly secretive world of high politics (the exception being Helco and Wildavsky 1981) although the move to more open government has facilitated greater willingness among government officials to be interviewed (Smith 1999).

There are, then, a number of research techniques which fall under the generic heading of qualitative research which have been widely used by sociologists and political scientists who have chosen one or more of them to elicit people's subjective experiences, opinions, beliefs and values and so forth. While academic researchers usually choose a research technique that is most appropriate for what they want to explore, the choice of methods is not merely a matter of technical superiority. As we shall now see, opting for one technique over another raises epistemological arguments about different ways of knowing the social world (Bryman 1998).

The epistemological underpinnings of qualitative methods

The use of methods is often associated with an epistemological position about the production of knowledge (May 1997; see also Chapter 1). Quantitative methods, for example, have been linked with a positivist stance that aligns itself with a particular view about the assumptions and mechanisms of the natural sciences (see Chapter 10). It is underpinned by a belief that only that which is grounded in the observable can count as valid knowledge (Halfpenny 1992; Halfpenny and McMylor 1994). A positivist notion of knowledge, therefore, is grounded in the objective and tangible and researchers working within this paradigm are preoccupied with

creating the conditions in which objective data can be collected. As Sanders notes in his chapter (Chapter 2), early twentieth-century positivists were concerned with the precise operationalisation and measurement of theoretical concepts (Henwood and Pidgeon 1993: 15; Lee 1993: 13). The preference is for survey research with a standardised approach to interviewing based on a predetermined questionnaire and closed questions where there is limited interaction between the interviewer and the respondent to avoid bias. The interviews can be replicated easily and are, therefore, reliable in reproducing similar facts. The statistical analysis of the coded replies produces observed regularities that form the basis of explanation, generalisation and prediction. The major concern of survey researchers is with the predictive ability of their statistical findings (Bryman 1988: 34). Overall, the highly structured interview associated with survey research is a form of communication under controlled circumstances somewhat analogous to an experimental situation found in the natural sciences (Fielding 1993b: 144).

Qualitative methods have been aligned with an interpretive epistemology that stresses the dynamic, constructed and evolving nature of social reality. In this view, there is no objective science that can establish universal truths or can exist independently of the beliefs, values and concepts created to understand the world. These concerns are unique to the social sciences and account for the different methods used in the natural and social sciences. Researchers committed to this paradigm attach primary importance to the perspective of conscious actors who attach subjective meaning to their actions and interpret their own situation and that of others (Benton 1977; Keat and Urry 1975: 205). Thus, intensive interviews are appropriate when seeking to understand people's motives and interpretations. Such guided conversations cannot be free of bias, although the influence of the researcher can be acknowledged. There is a strong emphasis on describing the context in which people live their lives, form opinions, act (or fail to act) and so on. Participant observers go to great lengths to watch people in their natural settings, especially since subjective meanings vary according to the context in which they are found. Consequently, the emphasis is on seeking to understand human experiences and practices rather than making predictions about behaviour (Henwood and Pidgeon 1993: 16). Explanation involves understanding and interpreting actions rather than drawing conclusions about relationships and regularities between statistical variables. Thus, the in-depth interview is about listening to people talking in order to gain some insight into their world-views and how they see things as they do (Fielding 1993b: 157).

It should be emphasised, however, that the distinction between the choice of methods and epistemological positions should not be overdrawn.

It would be ridiculous, for example, to dismiss all quantitative researchers as positivists (Marsh 1982, 1984)! To adopt such a position would imply that different methods are mutually exclusive and cannot be employed in conjunction with each other (see Chapter 11). The choice of methods is usually made on the basis of whether it is a suitable way of answering particular research questions (Bryman 1988: 108–9). Quantitative and qualitative methods involve collecting data in different ways and the crucial question is whether the choice of method is appropriate for the theoretical and empirical questions that the researcher seeks to address. As it is, social scientists increasingly use a mix of methods rather than one method in isolation (Brannen 1992; Cohen and Manion 1985). This is not to suggest that methodological eclecticism does not have technical or epistemological problems (Miles and Huberman 1984; Reichardt and Cook 1979). There are a number of technical issues raised by the mixing of methods such as how to deal with apparent inconsistencies between data sets, and whether or not one data source should take priority over another (Devine and Heath 1999: 199–205). There are also important epistemological issues at stake for, as Mason (1996: 28) has argued, researchers should ensure that the integration of methods is legitimate and based on 'similar, complementary or comparable assumptions about what can legitimately constitute knowledge or evidence'. Nevertheless, a combination of methods can lead to a more rounded and holistic perspective on the topic under investigation.

More recently, the epistemological underpinnings of the social sciences have been challenged by postmodernism that regards the quest for reliable knowledge of the social world as misguided (see, for example, Denzin 1997). As Williams and May (1996) note, postmodernist thinking has big implications for questions of epistemology and method (see Chapters 1 and 6). In relation to the former: 'postmodernism can be viewed as a critique of the values, goals and basis of analysis that, from the enlightenment onwards, have been assumed to be universally valid' (Williams and May 1996: 158). With reference to the latter: 'the alternative to the complacent foundationalism of modernism becomes the maxim ... that anything goes' (ibid.). More specifically, the postmodern critique of research practice has confronted empirical researchers with a dual crisis: a crisis in representation and a crisis in legitimation.

Crisis of representation

The first crisis is based on questioning the expert status of the researcher, given that: 'truth is contingent and nothing should be placed beyond the possibility of revision' (Williams and May 1996). It is not possible to

capture lived experience directly because the researcher is merely an interpreter whose own account has no greater claim to 'truth' than anyone else's account. There can never be a final accurate representation of what was meant or said – only different textual representations of different experiences (Denzin 1997: 5). Representation and reality can no longer be said to correspond to each other, therefore, and what becomes significant is how researchers use textual devices in an attempt to create 'authentic' accounts (Stronach and MacLure 1997). Postmodernism demands that researchers think about the research process and not just the research outcomes in a more radical way than they have done to date.

Crisis of legitimation

The crisis in legitimation arises from a rethinking of concepts such as validity, reliability and generalisability. A claim to validity, based on rules concerning the production of knowledge and its relationship to 'reality', is the usual means by which an account is given legitimacy and by which 'good' research is distinguishable from 'bad' research. Denzin (1997: 6), however, argues that attempts to claim validity for a piece of research: 'cling to the conception of a "world out there" that is truthfully and accurately captured by the researcher's method'. Consequently, the postmodernists reject specific criteria for judging research and 'doubts all criteria and privileges none' (Denzin 1997: 8).

The postmodern critique, therefore, sees the researcher as intrinsically implicated in the production of knowledge (Williams and May 1996). Moreover, centrality is given to text and to questions of power and authority that are inscribed within them (a text can be anything from a literary text, an official document or an intensive interview transcript, through to a photograph, a movie or a building). This means that a pivotal concern of postmodern research is the deconstruction of texts and their embedded power relations. As Williams and May (1996: 169) note: 'how the social world is represented becomes more important than the search for an independent "reality" described by such texts'. The advantage of this approach is that the socially constructed, interpretive and dynamic nature of reality is genuinely appreciated. That the accounts produced by the researcher in the process of deconstruction are as much the focus of the postmodern gaze as the initial texts upon which they based their analysis may be seen as a disadvantage however. As I have argued elsewhere (Devine and Heath 1999), the postmodern researcher is consequently caught in a hall of mirrors with too much attention devoted to the preoccupations of the researcher rather than the research topic. See this tension, for example, in Charlesworth's (2000) study of the 'political dispossessed' working class of Rotherham, South Yorkshire in the UK.

To date, there are few examples of empirical research – especially in political science – which have been informed by postmodern influences. Those who have contributed to the debate on postmodernism have not really discussed the issue of method head-on other than in a highly abstract way. Therefore, it is not entirely clear what form postmodern research strategies might take. The emphasis on uncertainty and disappointment is not especially helpful. To be sure, research is often messy and rarely proceeds in the neat and tidy way that researchers wish for (Devine and Heath 1999). Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' research according to certain criteria and those criteria can vary from one methodology to another. This position implies that it is possible to cultivate knowledge of the social world and that research can make important substantive contributions to an understanding and explanation of the social world. This is not to say that the issues raised by the debates over the crisis in representation and legitimation should be ignored. On the contrary, the debate concerning the limits of validity and the competing claims of alternative accounts is welcome. Discussion on the degree to which any knowledge of the social world is highly dependent on the methodological devices employed by the researcher is also welcome. Still, the wholesale dismissal of conventional criteria for assessing social research can easily collapse into a rather hopeless relativism that gets nobody anywhere! (see Chapters 1, 9, 11).

Criticisms of qualitative research

While the sterile debate about quantitative verses qualitative research no longer preoccupies social scientists (Bryman 1988: 84–5), there are some who still dismiss qualitative research as impressionistic, piecemeal and even idiosyncratic (even if political correctness demands that such views are expressed in private conversations rather than publicly in print). Quantitative research is seen as representative and reliable. Systematic statistical analysis ensures that research findings and interpretations are robust. Overall, quantitative research is replicable and comparable and generalisations can be made with a high degree of certainty. Social surveys produce hard scientific data (Hellevik 1984; De Vaus 1991). In contrast, qualitative research is often dismissed as unrepresentative and atypical. Field relations raise problems about bias while the interpretation of the material can be highly subjective and not open to external validation. Finally, qualitative research is neither replicable nor comparable and, therefore, not the basis on which generalisations can be made. Qualitative research produces soft, unscientific, results. On the face of it, these criticisms of qualitative research seem damning. Closer reflection,

however, suggests that these criticisms are misplaced. That is to say, what is a valid method depends on the aims and objectives of a research project. For example, if the goal of qualitative research is to explore the meaning of voters' attachment to a political party in depth, it is not concerned about the frequency of particular views and opinions. It would be nonsensical to employ methods more appropriate to capture the latter rather than the former. Moreover, as we shall see, qualitative researchers are as systematic and rigorous in their methods of empirical investigation as quantitative researchers.

Representativeness and reliability

The issues of representativeness and reliability revolve around the question of designing and generating a sample of 'people, places or activities suitable for study' (Lee 1993: 60). It is often assumed that qualitative researchers do not devote as much attention to generating a sample as quantitative researchers because they are not concerned with representativeness (see Miller 1995). This is far from the case, precisely because there is often no sampling frame from which to draw a random list of names to approach for interview. Snowball sampling is the usual way of generating a sample. Interviewees are asked to nominate potential informants and the request is made at each subsequent interview until the required number is reached. Snowballing a sample continues throughout the period in the field. However, there are problems in generating a sample from one network of people with particular characteristics because interviewees can nominate a set of interconnected people. Researchers have to be on their guard against producing a restricted sample and find ways of generating as wide a sample of interviewees as possible. It is not surprising that most qualitative research reports devote a considerable amount of time to the issues of how a sample was generated and the characteristics of the informants included in the final sample. In sum, the choice of sampling methods or the use of sampling frames is no less important in qualitative research than quantitative research. A failure to justify one's sampling strategies in any research only undermines the strength of the claims that can be made about the data (Devine and Heath 1999: 13–4).

Objectivity and bias

Qualitative research is often dismissed because of bias and the lack of objectivity in the collection of empirical material. The relationship between an interviewer and interviewee is not aloof, for example, since the interviewer participates in the conversation (Bulmer 1984: 209; Newell 1993: 97). The relationship cannot be distant if confidential personal

information is to be revealed or when sensitive topics are discussed (Lee 1993: 111). In such instances, a greater level of involvement is required so that the researcher inspires trust (Bulmer 1984: 111). Thus, qualitative researchers neither subscribe to the view that research can be objective, nor do they seek objectivity in field relations. That is not to say, however, that field relations are unproblematic and their impact on the collection of the information can be ignored. Playing an active role in facilitating conversations is not easy. Informants are often anxious to please and offer responses that they perceive to be desirable. They may seek to impress with shows of bravado and create the impression that they know more than they do. They may ask the interviewer to offer their own opinions on the topics under discussion (Finch 1984). All of these considerations demand that the interviewer is reflexive about the conduct of an interview or an episode while engaged in participant observation and that they think about the nature of interaction on what was said, how it was said and so forth. Thus, rather than attempt to control the effects of bias in field relations, qualitative researchers prefer to acknowledge it in the process of collecting empirical material and explicitly consider its effects on substantive findings (Devine and Heath 1999: 9–10; Hobbs and May 1993; Lee 1993).

Interpretation

Concern is frequently voiced about the interpretation of qualitative material. Is the interpretation placed on the material merely a personal reading? Of course, the analysis and interpretation of qualitative material proceeds in a different manner to quantitative research that is concerned about relationships between variables (Rose 1982; Silverman 1997). Transcripts can be analysed manually, being subjected to numerous readings until different themes emerge, or, with the aid of computer packages for qualitative research, coded and analysed on this basis. All empirical material, be it of a quantitative or qualitative kind, is subject to different interpretations and there is no definitive interpretation that tells the 'truth'. Nevertheless, the qualitative researcher has to demonstrate the plausibility of their interpretation like their quantitative counterpart. Various ways of enhancing the validity of interpretations exist. The interpretation of interview material can be discussed with a group of researchers to obtain a consensus on the interpretation. It is possible to ask the informant for their reaction to the interpretation of the interview transcript and this may lead to a reinterpretation. The plausibility of an ethnography can be enhanced by doing full justice to the context of the participant observation or intensive interviewing (Atkinson 1990: 129). Finally, the internal consistency of an account can be assessed to establish

whether an analysis is coherent with the themes that have been identified. External validity can be considered by checking findings with other studies (Fielding 1993b: 166). In sum, the onus is on the qualitative researcher to make the interpretation of the data as explicit as possible in the development of an argument using systematically gathered data (Mason 1996; Silverman 1997).

Generalisability

Finally, qualitative research is often dismissed because it is not possible to generalise the findings from a study that confines itself to a small number of people or a particular setting. Qualitative researchers have to be tentative about making inferences from a small number of cases to the population at large, yet qualitatative researchers can design research that facilitates an understanding of other situations (Rose 1982: 38). The findings of one in-depth study can be corroborated with other research to establish similarities and differences. Such a comparison would be a limited test of confirmation (Marsh 1984: 91). As it is, it is rarely the case that a sample of interviewees is so unrepresentative or the interpretations so misleading that suggestion about the wider incidence of certain phenomena is wholly specious. Finally, qualitative research findings are often the basis on which subsequent quantitative research is conducted from which generalisations can be made. To date, however, there have been few genuine attempts in political science to bring quantitative and qualitative data together to address inconsistencies as well as consistencies (an issue which will be considered further in the conclusion). Qualitative research, therefore, can have wider significance beyond the time and place in which it was conducted (Ward-Schofield 1993: 205). Qualitative research methodology has its disadvantages like other methods and techniques. Its advantages, however, are clear where the goal of a piece of research is to explore people's experiences, practices, values and attitudes in depth and to establish their meaning for those concerned.

Illustration of qualitative research

Somewhat surprisingly, qualitative research has been largely absent in the field of electoral behaviour. It may be that voting is particularly amenable to quantitative research – along the lines of the British Election Surveys (BES) – and that this has inhibited the use of other methods and techniques. The over-reliance on the BES was the source of debate in the early 1990s (Devine 1992; Dunleavy 1990). It is certainly the case that other methodologies are now employed in the study of elections. That said, the

BES remains the dominant mode of enquiry even though, as one of the principal authors of the 1997 BES publications (Evans and Norris 1999; Norris *et al.* 1999) has readily acknowledged, the validity of the statistical data remains open to some doubt (Norris 1997). That is to say, the BES had been used to develop various models of voting behaviour but they are essentially socio-psychological models of individual behaviour derived from the analysis of aggregate patterns and trends of voting from the electorate as a whole (Norris 1997). Indeed, Sanders (1999: 201) has conceded that 'aggregate patterns can often hide a great deal more than they reveal about the electoral calculations that individual voters make'. Against this background, a qualitative study of why people changed their vote, or wavered but voted as before, was undertaken immediately after the 1997 general election (White *et al.* 1999). The sample of 45 interviewees (see Table 9.1) was drawn from the campaign panel of the BES and interviewed in depth six weeks after the election on how and why they voted as they did.

Why did these voters act differently in 1997 or consider doing so but remain loyal to their political party on polling day? There was a long-standing and deep-seated disillusionment with the Conservative Government. The catalogue of disgruntlement with the Conservative Party was long and familiar (Denver 1997; Norton 1998; Whiteley 1997). The informants focused particularly on the standing of the leaders and the

Table 9.1 *The political profile of the sample, 1992–97*

Alterations in 1997	
Conservative to Liberal Democrat	7
Conservative to Labour	9
Labour to Liberal Democrat	3
Liberal to Labour	5
Green Party to Labour	1
Voting to non voting	7
Non voting to voting	2
	34
Waverers in 1997	
1992 Conservative voters	7
1992 Liberal Democrat voters	3
1992 Labour voters	1
	11
Total interviewed	**45**

Source: Adapted from White *et al.* (1999: 10).

related imagery of the parties. John Major, for example, was widely regarded as a weak and ineffectual leader who could not hold his increasingly disunited party together. As a previous Conservative voter explained:

> Well, she [Margaret Thatcher] was strong. You know, she wasn't scared to get up and, you know, if they were slagging her off like, she slagged 'em back. I think they have to be a strong leader otherwise the party's no good because he needs to be, or she needs to be, whoever it may be, they have to control. They have to have a head to tell the other ones, or sort out the other ones. It's no use letting everyone do as they want 'cos, to get away with what they want, 'cos it just goes as you've seen the Conservatives this last time. All they did leading up to the election was fight with each other. That's all they did. Or fight with the other ones. They didn't actually in my eyes, didn't sort of get it together themselves. (Male, 30s –Wirral West)

Tony Blair, in contrast, was credited with transforming the Labour Party into a political party that could win an election. While many had been unsure of Kinnock, Blair was seen as genuine and likely to keep the promises he made. Most importantly, it was his perceived strength and decisiveness in leading his party in opposition and preparing it for government that impressed interviewees. His leadership appeared to attract younger voters, unencumbered by Labour's past, to switch directly from Conservative to Labour (see also Crewe and Thomson 1999). An evaluation of the leaders, therefore, was often intertwined with an evaluation of the political parties they led and each shared the positive and negative traits identified. Focusing on the leaders, therefore, appeared to be a shorthand way of discussing the state of the political parties especially amongst the least politically interested and informed interviewees. These findings appear to confirm Crewe and King's (1994) argument that the leaders have an indirect influence – via their own relationship to the party they lead – on the way in which people vote.

The image of the political parties was also very influential for the sample of voters. Two aspects of party imagery were important. First, they clearly associated the political parties with different classes although the association had changed in recent years. That is to say, long-standing Conservatives who had previously felt that the Conservative Party represented all classes in its safe management of the economy no longer felt that way. These voters expressed their unhappiness with the 'fat cats' – the senior managers of various private and recently privatised utilities – who were the main beneficiaries of privatisation. Many of the interviewees talked about how the 'rich had got richer and the poor had got poorer' under the

Conservatives and that the Tories 'only look after the rich'. While this view was often expressed by Liberal Democrat or Labour voters, it was increasingly a view shared, albeit reluctantly, by long-standing Conservative voters. The mass appeal of the Conservatives under Thatcher in the late 1970s and early 1980s had clearly disappeared. In contrast, Labour was seen as representing the mass of ordinary working people including the middle class and the working class. The party's focus on the issues of health and education tapped into concerns about welfare services on which most people depended. Their policies for shorter waiting lists and smaller class sizes were seen as reflecting the concerns of the mass, rather than the few. The Labour Party's appeal, therefore, was a broad-based and inclusive appeal that focused on concerns shared by the working class and the middle class. Thus, class voting may have been low in 1997 (Evans *et al.* 1999: 94), but class imagery was an important part of the electoral appeal to the parties on which the interviewees commented.

Second, the transformation of the Labour Party from Old to New Labour was influential on how the interviewees voted. Its transformation was especially important for those interviewees who had voted Liberal Democrat in 1992. The perceived loosening of the relationship between Labour and the unions opened the way for many of the interviewees to vote Labour (Kellner 1997: 120–1). After all, the threat of union domination and the implications for the economy – often used by the Conservative Party against Labour – were no longer a consideration. In 1992, some voters had misgivings about Labour even if they had wanted change, as a mobile voter who voted Liberal Democrat in 1992 and then switched to Labour in 1997 explained:

> I wanted it, the Government changed from Tory ... [I voted] just to get the Tories out but at the same time I didn't really want Labour in then because ... there were a lot of things, you know, it was still in my mind about all this militant stuff ... miners striking, Arthur Scargill shaking his fists, what's his name in Liverpool doing dodgy deals and getting loads of backhanders ... I didn't know much about them [Liberal Democrats] at all but maybe I liked Paddy Ashdown and thought he seemed a real man ... All I can remember is that I wanted things to change. (Female, 20s – Northampton North)

Moreover, the perceived convergence of the political parties was noted in favourable terms. Labour's move to the centre ground – its willingness to forgo old dogmatic policies like nationalisation and adopt new pragmatic policies such as jointly funded public and private ventures – impressed many of the interviewees (Budge 1999; Sanders 1999). As a voter who moved from Conservative to the Social Democrat Party to Labour explained:

> I was by now totally clear that the Conservative Party had to move ... If they had another spell in power you were really starting to get a one-party state ... But in developments in the year before ... The Labour people had obviously changed a lot of what they were trying to do. They'd modernised themselves, admitted they'd moved. They'd moved, in fact, very much into the SDP area. When you looked at the way they were doing [things] and what they were talking [about] and the people they'd got, it was almost as if the SDP had risen again. They were very similar. Also, the leader character seemed to be attractive and strong enough to say what he thought, and what he thought was reasonable and matched my own sort of thinking. (Male 60s – Northampton North)

In this instance, the move across the political spectrum had been gradual and painless and, indeed, the voter quoted here emphasised that the parties had moved to his way of thinking rather than vice versa. Labour's past image as being too closely associated with the unions, too left-wing and too internally divided, which had impeded victory in 1992 (Heath *et al.* 1994), had been left behind. As we shall see, however, the Labour Party's transformation left traditional Labour voters unhappy with the electoral choice before them in 1997.

Reference has already been made to the importance of issues to the interviewees, although it is important to stress that which issues were important, how important they were and how they were discussed were closely tied to past political allegiances. The issue of Europe, for example, was important to only a small group of Conservative interviewees who invariably remained loyal in 1997. The state of the economy and the issue of taxes were discussed in that some interviewees commented on how taxes had increased under the Conservatives thereby reneging on earlier promises. However, the dominant issues were education and health (Norris 1997). Conservative voters who shifted to the Liberal Democrats in 1997 mentioned these issues although they approved of the way that the Liberal Democrats acknowledged the need to increase income tax to improve services, while Labour remained vague about how it would finance improvements. Thus, one switcher explained:

> Mr Ashdown said he would put up taxes, which I would agree with, and I would willingly pay the extra coppers and what not that he said he was going to charge me, provided he said he was going to use them for ... education, health and things like that. (Male, 60s – Oxford West and Abingdon)

Somewhat ironically, a policy of explicitly stating taxes would be raised to pay for better services also prompted disillusioned Labour Party supporters to vote Liberal Democrat. The Liberal Democrats were

perceived as more radical than Labour, therefore, in stating explicitly that taxes would go up rather than accepting the Conservative agenda of not increasing them (Budge 1999; Holiday 1997). This was not a bone of contention for previous Conservative voters who switched to Labour however. As a young interviewee explained:

Well, you want the best for your children. You want your children to grow up in a safer and like educational world and I just thought, like all them things in the news you know, the last government wasn't doing enough and now, I've got to, had to show an interest 'cos my children are going there [school]. So that's why I started voting Labour 'cos they said they're going to change it and they're going to change, like the crime, cut down teenage crime. (Male, 20s, Northampton North)

Issues, therefore, were important to the interviewees (Sarlvik and Crewe 1983) although which issues were important to them, how they were discussed and their salience relative to other considerations were heavily influenced by their past partisan alignment.

Finally, tactical considerations and evaluations about local and national outcomes influenced how the interviewees actually cast their vote because how they acted varied even if they shared similar assessments of the political parties (Curtice and Steed 1997: 310). There were former Conservative voters, for example, who were seriously attracted to Labour but local constituency factors intervened. As a voter explained:

Tactically, I voted to get them out but I wanted Labour in. If I'd been in a seat where Labour had a chance of winning, I would have voted Labour so I wanted them in but because I'm down here in a country area with farming, hunting, shooting and fishing, [it was] an absolutely wasted vote if you voted Labour. There's 5,000 people voted Labour and 23,000 voted Conservative and 21,000 voted Lib Dem last time so we thought, 'right, vote Lib Dem and we'll topple them' which we did. It was a tactical vote, but if I'd had a chance of voting Labour I would have voted straight Labour. (Female, 40s – Devon West and Torridge)

Local factors also worked in the opposite direction, leading wavering Conservative voters to remain loyal, for example, rather than vote Liberal Democrat or Labour. Evaluations of the national outcome – namely, the likelihood of a Conservative defeat and Labour victory – also influenced how some interviewees voted (Miller *et al.* 1990). It compelled some voters, for example, to remain loyal to the Conservatives to keep their vote up rather than waste their vote on the Referendum Party. Disillusioned Labour supporters who voted Liberal Democrat did so in the context of a likely landslide victory for Labour. A former Labour voter who much preferred the Liberal Democrat policy on education explained that:

When I'd seen the polls and they said, you know, Labour would definitely get in and whatever, then I thought, well, I'd vote for the one I feel is the best. Anyway, so I voted Liberal Democrat. I thought it would be nice to get some Liberals in as well. If they [the polls] had said 'oh, it's a bit dubious whether Conservative or Labour was going to win', I think I'd probably have gone Labour. (Female, 30s – Colne Valley)

In this context, previously loyal Labour supporters felt they had the space to vote differently or abstain in the event of a landslide. Tactical considerations, local constituency factors and evaluations of the national result, therefore, played an important role in shaping the interviewees' voting decisions.

Overall, the qualitative research highlighted the continuing influence of family and class on early voting behaviour. Most importantly, it shapes voters' images of the political parties, including support for one particular party and opposition to other political parties. The nature of early political socialisation in the family and local community also influences the extent to which party attachments are strong or weak. Indeed, early images of the political parties can be very enduring and are often the starting point from which voters evaluate leaders, parties, issues and so forth. It was found, for example, that most of the sample had long histories of voting for one political party prior to 1997. It should be stressed, however, that this stability was not necessarily indicative of a strong commitment to a political party; sometimes it was merely a product of routine or falling in with family and friends. Be that as it may, images of the political parties are not static but change as the issues and policies they stand for change and the perceived unity and strength of the party change. Against the background of eighteen years of power, long-standing Conservative voters, for example, were dismayed with a party leader who they had been ambivalent about in 1992. They were unhappy with the extent of disunity and squabbling over Europe within the party. They were unconvinced by the Conservative Party's claim to run a sound economy, uninterested in their agenda of keeping taxes down and increasingly convinced that the Conservatives represented the rich rather than the whole electorate.

In contrast, the Labour Party was no longer burdened by its poor imagery of the late 1970s and 1980s. The Conservatives' attempts to ignite fear and uncertainty about Labour's ability to handle the economy and to portray it as the party of big spenders fell on deaf ears, especially among younger voters with little or no memory of events nearly two decades earlier. Instead, voters were impressed by the Labour Party with its strong leader and united party and were convinced by its agenda of improving education and health services. The appeal to the whole of the electorate also convinced many of the interviewees to support them. This is not to

suggest that they easily moved across the political spectrum. Their political histories, past party alignment, early images of the parties and tactical considerations greatly influenced voters' decision-making processes. Thus, some previous Conservative voters would never vote Labour and chose to abstain, remain loyal or vote Liberal Democrat. Other Conservative voters, unfettered by a strong alignment to the Conservatives or negative images of the Labour Party in the past, could shift to Labour without too much difficulty. Labour's transformation was especially attractive to Liberal Democrat supporters who now viewed the party's agenda as less dogmatic and more pragmatic and, thus, more in tune with their views and opinions. This support, however, came at a price for Labour. Its transformation had not found favour among its traditional constituency of working-class supporters strongly committed to socialist ideals. These voters, like their Conservative counterparts at the other end of the political spectrum, either abstained, remained loyal to Labour or voted Liberal Democrat.

In sum, the qualitative research explained why individual interviewees voted while others did not, and why some changed their votes while others remained loyal, in a way that quantitative data cannot. The material suggests that the 1997 election was critical (Norris and Evans 1999) – in some way different from past elections – in that some long-standing Conservative voters were so disillusioned that they were prepared to place their vote elsewhere. It also suggests that it was not a critical election – that it shared similarities with the past – in the way that Labour faced the problem, once again, of winning middle-class voters and losing working-class voters. The analysis of the qualitative material was also suggestive in highlighting patterns and regularities between groups of voters within the sample in terms of how they responded to party appeals, which issues were important to them and so forth. Young Conservative voters, for example, appeared to find it easier to move directly to Labour, while some older Conservatives voters would never, in their wildest dreams, consider voting Labour! This suggests that the concept of political generations and cohort effects which Butler and Stokes (1974) spoke of many years ago should be reconsidered in the study of elections. These comments suggest ways in which further analysis of the BES could proceed. There could, for example, be more disaggregation of the data to look at different groups of voters, rather than just examining aggregate patterns and trends among the electorate as a whole.

Some might argue that the qualitative material presented here does not offer any revelations. Only those who remain hostile to qualitative research demand that it demonstrate its worth by some new extraordinary revelations. Arguably, listening to the way in which the voters of this study described how they came to vote revealed much about the causal processes

by which final decisions were made. This contribution is as great as any account of the predictive power of individual variables to the development of explanatory theories of voting behaviour and may, indeed, lead to a widening of the remit of election studies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been argued that qualitative research has made a significant contribution to political science. Be that as it may, there are some political scientists who are hostile towards qualitative research albeit in the privacy of conversation rather than the publicity of print. They remain sceptical of what they see as a costly approach to the collection of political data. They scoff at the small sample sizes of qualitative work that they reject as atypical and worthless. They dismiss qualitative findings as insubstantial and not worthy of note, since they are rarely new or unfamiliar. They think it is the stuff of sociologists and not proper political 'scientists'! Fortunately, there are other political scientists who are more enlightened about qualitative research. The inclusion of this chapter in a political science textbook for students is testimony to this fact. There are signs that the advantages of qualitative research are being recognised as more research of this kind is being undertaken in the discipline. Moreover, there are encouraging indications that more research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods is being undertaken. The ESRC-funded Democracy and Participation programme is a case in point. These developments are to be welcomed. For political science as a whole, they herald an era in which epistemological questions about how we know the political world and the process of producing knowledge about that world are not taken for granted. Arguably, the discipline will be all the better for it.

Further reading

There are numerous books that discuss different methods and techniques in the social sciences.

- One of the most useful texts is Gilbert's (1993) edited collection that considers quantitative and qualitative methodologies.
- Recently published books focusing on qualitative research that have enjoyed favourable reviews include Silverman (1997), Mason (1996) and Devine and Heath (1999).
- Good qualitative research straddling sociology and politics include Roseneil's (1995) study of political action at Greenham in the UK and Eliasoph's (2000) study of civic groups and avoiding politics in the USA.

Chapter 10

Quantitative Methods

PETER JOHN

This chapter examines four aspects of the quantitative approach: the collection and management of data; the advantages associated with the quantitative method; common objections to these methods; and the different types of analysis that can be employed, including multivariate methods. However, first it is important to contextualise the approach within the broader discipline of political science.

The divide between quantitative and qualitative research remains highly pronounced. The communities of political scientists who work with large numbers of observations are often segregated into sub-topics. As a result many academics assume that quantitative investigation *only* concerns elections, voting systems, party manifestos and political attitudes rather than having a more general application. The division becomes manifest in the descriptors researchers apply to themselves and to others: quantitative researchers are known as political scientists; the rest often have the labels of students of politics, area specialists, biographers and public policy specialists. Not only do different topics, skills and networks create the divide; it is sustained by apparently clashing conceptions of the purpose and practice of social science. Many qualitative researchers think that quantitative work is underpinned by a crude version of positivism whilst qualitative work describes complex realities, acknowledges that researchers cannot separate their values from the political world, engages with and seeks to understand the beliefs and aspirations of those who are being researched and rejects the idea that there are universal rules of human behaviour. In this context a review of quantitative methods cannot just be a description of the different techniques on offer. Such an account would reinforce the idea that quantitative researchers live in a different spirit world to others. Instead this chapter aims to persuade sceptics of the depth and subtlety of quantitative analysis. Moreover, the current debate between quantitative and qualitative research is shallow and rests on stereotypes of the research process.

The argument presented here mirrors that of King, Keohane and Verba in their book, *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994). Writing with the tools of quantitative analysis in mind, they argue that both fields apply a 'unified logic of inference with differences mainly of style and specific technique' (1994: 1). They recommend that qualitative inferences could be improved by the adoption of a few straightforward techniques. Whilst the book should be compulsory reading for every research student, experienced researchers often feel uncomfortable with the clean and tidy nature of their programme, which seems to squeeze out the messy problem-solving and practical way in which most qualitative researchers actually do the job. Often investigators respect their hunches; they discover bits of data by accident, 'play detective' and follow up leads. Sometimes they start with the wrong research question and, after many blind alleys, come to a moment of revelation. It is often quite late in the project that the student or even experienced academic knows how to frame the research problem and is able to test alternative hypotheses. This chapter claims that quantitative researchers also engage in messy and unpredictable data analysis; they solve problems incrementally and follow their intuitions just like their qualitative counterparts. They discuss their strategies with their colleagues and seek the advice of others in the research community. The message is that all researchers should design their projects to be capable of testing hypotheses, but they should also use their practical knowledge to carry out exciting and imaginative pieces of work.

Quantitative researchers sometimes help their critics because convention requires them not to report the interpretive aspects of their craft. They report complex statistical analysis as though they had run their data through a 'black box', making knowledge of the technique a necessary prerequisite to understanding the article. This chapter aims to demystify both the theory and presentation of quantitative research. The idea is not to knock it down, but to show that much of its practice coheres with the rich traditions of social science. The chapter also reports recent developments in the United States of America where conventions and rules of scholarly journals encourage or require political scientists to present as much information as possible about how they gather their data, choose their models and ensure that others can replicate their results (King 1995). Critics of the classic technique of political science, the ordinary least squares (OLS) model, will be relieved to find that many methodologists share their worries and that the new generation of non-parametric models overcome some of the problems. Moreover, in spite of rapid advances in statistical techniques, the use of programming and software, the leading US scholars argue that researchers should make further efforts to present their data more effectively (King *et al.* 2000).

The collection and management of data

Quantitative work rests on the observation and measurement of repeated incidences of a political phenomenon, such as voting for a political party, an allocation of resources by a government agency or citizen attitudes towards taxation and public spending. By observing variables over a large number of cases, it is possible to make inferences about a class of political behaviour, such as who votes for a political party, who gets resources from governments and what is the distribution of attitudes to public spending in the adult population. With large numbers, social scientists can confidently make generalisations about the empirical world. Statistical theory shows that the larger the number of cases (or the greater number in proportion to the whole population), the surer data analysts can be that what they observe is not a random occurrence. Moreover, political scientists often want to analyse whole populations, such as the voting record of all Members of Parliament or all electoral systems in the world, which involves large numbers.

Qualitative researchers are often suspicious about the way in which their colleagues generate observations. Particularly when variables are attitudinal or behavioural, like those drawn from large-scale surveys using standardised questions, the measures appear to ignore social and political contexts (Kirk and Miller 1986). Even the statistics that emerge from government departments may reflect political decisions about how to collect data. In the end, official information is what politicians and bureaucrats wish to make public. Some techniques, such as content analysis (the classification and counting of data drawn from the texts of media or political debates), appear to strip out the context of the language and render it meaningless or sterile. Quantitative researchers appear to be blind to the relationship between the observer and observed which makes each act of collecting data unique. Critics claim that quantitative researchers ignore the complexity of the world by their quest to turn politics into a series of repeated and identical experiences or events (Ragin 2000).

Qualitative researchers recommend that investigators immerse themselves in their data and seek to understand the perspective of who is being researched (Allan 1991). But the recommendations of effort and care do not overcome the fundamental problems that qualitative researchers highlight. If their point is pushed to its logical conclusion, no researcher can understand the perspectives of the researched given the limitations of time and the interference of social science methods. If pure understanding is the goal, the long informal interview is as contaminated as the standardised survey question. Qualitative and quantitative researchers can find a way out of this conundrum by accepting that what they observe is partial and limited by their research instruments. A successful and meaningful project

does not need to find out about respondents' constructions of reality. For the purposes of the study, what matters is whether the information about an individual or organisation indicates an underlying set of attitudes, dispositions or behaviours. For example, researchers do not need to know about voters' social construction of the realm of economics when finding out whether the electorate considers the state of the economy in their voting decisions.

After taking into account the limited objectives of most of their studies, quantitative researchers become aware that complex social realities may not always be captured by repeated observations. In certain situations, quantification is not appropriate as what is being measured could be made either meaningless or biased by socially constructing the data. For example, research that depends on standardised questions may not be replicated across countries because of differences in culture and language. Even in the appropriate contexts, researchers should attend to the validity of the data to know whether they measure what the project intends them to. For example, in the qualitative prelude to most surveys and in pilots, questions are bandied about, interviewers evaluate interviews and respondents fill in an additional questionnaire about their experience of completing questions. Quantitative researchers pay a lot of attention to reliability (that data are produced independently of the activity of measurement) and seek to maximise it where possible. For example, survey researchers have frequent discussions about the effect of question wording and order on the responses to their questions. Content analysis researchers use inter-coder reliability scores to find out whether they coded an item in the same way (Krippendorff 1980: 129–54). Such problems do not just occur in surveys and the analysis of texts. Statisticians who use data from government departments frequently investigate how the data are collected. They consider the possible biases in the results and think of ways to correct for them. There is even discussion about the extent to which research instruments reflect biases within social science, such as in favour of class-based explanations in voting behaviour (Catt 1996: 67–9, 92). Also Sanders (1999) argues that British surveys of voting behaviour use a question on party identification that measures voting preference rather than a determinant of it. This mistake biases the results of studies that use party identification to predict voting behaviour. Debates also occur in footnotes and appendices and in discussions and emails between colleagues; they become part of the common stock of knowledge that members of the research community acquire. These critical activities show that quantitative researchers do the same things as their qualitative colleagues: they seek to find the best data to answer their research questions.

Quantitative researchers spend much time and effort thinking about their data. Choosing data or sampling appears an easy task but it contains

many hidden pitfalls. The sample must allow the investigator to make inferences, but often it is not clear what constitutes the population. If the topic of study is about change over time, which years should the researcher choose to analyse? Surveys contain many problems, such as how to define a household. They may need to be re-weighted because of the stratification of the sample (Skinner *et al.* 1989). There are also choices about how to measure the variables. No perfect set of data exists: for example, response rates to surveys may be low and archives may contain missing years. Although the electronic storage of data gives the impression of permanence, disks sometimes decay and data get lost in large file stores. Overcoming these problems requires attention to practical issues and to theory about what are the best data for the study. No solution is ideal, but researchers pick up practical knowledge from their colleagues and friends about how to solve these problems and learn about the pitfalls of particular choices.

The collection and manipulation of data invite errors. Interviewers, research assistants or survey companies sometimes input responses to questionnaires incorrectly; researchers accidentally delete cases and variables; the transfer of files between software packages and across the Internet can create 'dirt' in the data; and researchers can even accidentally work on the wrong or old data set because they did not label it correctly. They may even forget how they created their variables because they did not note what they did at each stage. One of the problems is that the speed and efficiency of modern computers encourage researchers to think that their data are 'clean'. But most political scientists learn to be careful after making silly errors when their concentration lapses. As mistakes are so easy to make, researchers spend a large amount of their time carefully collecting data, checking and rechecking how they or their research assistant entered the information and correcting their errors. Even with this culture of paranoia, mistakes still occur in published work, sometimes in the best quality journals (for example, see the correction of Garrett (1988) by King *et al.* 2000: 356).

The power of description

One of the advantages of descriptive measures is that they allow the observer to split the observations and to examine the proportions, such as the percentage of a group who support a political party. Judgements about these proportions form an essential part of the interpretation of data. In journalism and other forms of commentary, there are debates about whether a percentage is too big or too small, and descriptive political

science is no exception. For example, consider an imaginary statistic showing that 5 per cent of the electorate believe in repatriation. Commentators can either interpret it as evidence of alarming racism or of tolerance of the bulk of the population. To resolve this dilemma, social scientists should place the statistic in its proper context, taking into account arguments about what defines a liberal society and existing empirical knowledge. The interpretation of the 5 per cent would differ with the additional information that, for example, 10 per cent of the population believed in it twenty years previously.

Summary statistics are useful in understanding the properties of the data, such as measures of central points so that researchers can know the average or typical point in the data. The most common is the mean value or average, but there is also the median (middle observation) and mode (the most frequent value). As important are measures of dispersion. Observers find it useful to know whether the observations converge on the average value or are widely distributed. For example, if the interest is in response times of fire brigades in different locations, researchers and residents may be interested in finding out which area has the lowest average response time. But they should also be interested in the dispersion around the average as residents would like to know how likely the fire engines will arrive close to the mean time. As with central points, there are a number of measures, such as the inter-quartile range (the distance between the upper and lower quartiles) and the standard deviation (the square root of the variance). When deciding which measure to use, researchers need to think carefully about their data and decide whether it is nominal (with categories that are just different from each other, for example, male or female), ordinal (with measures that involve ranking), and ratio/interval (with values that have equal intervals between categories). Investigators may wish to look at the shape of the distribution, such as whether it is unimodal (spread evenly around one point) or bimodal or multimodal (having a number of peaks), which can inform much about what the data reveal. Alternatively the data may be skewed or symmetrical, leptokurtotic (bunched around the mean) or normal. The normal is particularly interesting because it shows the distribution is random.

When technical terms appear qualitative researchers start to think that quantitative topics are not for them. But they merely formalise what people do in everyday life. Imagine a person walking into a room full of people. The person would immediately size up the gathering by asking how many people there are, how many are of a certain type or how many old people or young people there are. When coming to these judgements, people make approximate proportions, averages and distributions. Descriptive statistics standardise these common-sense ideas (or common-

sense ideas make sense of the statistics). Moreover, such statistics appear regularly in newspapers and in qualitative research.

Paradoxically, quantitative researchers do not use descriptive statistics enough, only reporting them as the prelude to applying sophisticated tests. But much can be gained by their careful and imaginative use. To obtain the best results, quantitative researchers must immerse themselves in their data and explore the myriad possible ways of cutting and representing them. Familiarity with descriptive measures assists an understanding of the complexity of the topic and can help researchers interpret the output from more complex statistical models. In short, quantitative researchers should be as intimate with their research materials as their qualitative colleagues. As Jenkins writes, 'The statistician should fall in love with his data' (cited by Franzosi 1994: 45). Finally, much can be gained by representing descriptive data pictorially in the form of bar charts, pies and plots. Most software packages easily provide these.

Tables and inferential statistics

Social scientists often infer or deduce models of causation that they wish to test. Such models often hypothesise a strong relationship between two variables (either positive or negative). Social scientists assume that the values of one variable cause variation in another. The explaining terms are called independent variables and the dependent variable is what is being explained. For example, in a project about what causes people to volunteer, which is an important topic in the burgeoning literature on social capital (see for example Verba *et al.* 1995), theory – in the form of the social–economic status (SES) model of political behaviour – may suggest that those from wealthy families are more likely to join organisations. Logically it would not be possible for volunteering to affect social background, so it is clear that wealth is independent and volunteering is dependent. Such a project can only test whether social background affects voluntary activity or not rather than the other way round.

One of the simplest ways to find out if one variable determines or is associated with another is tables or cross-tabulations. Tables show how the values or categories of one variable are expressed as the categories of another. Researchers frequently use tables in survey research. If the volunteering project had been carried out in the days before computers, researchers would have sorted all the cards containing the records of the interviews into the piles of wealthy volunteers, non-wealthy volunteers, wealthy non-volunteers and non-wealthy non-volunteers. Then they would

have counted the numbers of cards of each category, worked out their percentages as a proportion of each variable and represented the results in a two-by-two table. It is conventional to place the independent variable along the top of the table and have the dependent on the stem. The researcher can examine the percentage of volunteers who are wealthy and look across the table to compare with the percentage of non-volunteers.

Now that the records of surveys can be stored as data matrixes in software packages, such as STATA (StataCorp 1999), researchers can create such a table in seconds. But their construction is surprisingly tricky. Often variables need to be recoded, such as by transforming the individual ages of respondents into bands of age groups. Working out which measures to use requires knowledge of the data and attention to theory to select the appropriate units.

Researchers who use tables from surveys also need to run a battery of tests to show that the associations could not have happened just by chance. Because surveys are samples of a larger population, associations could appear because of unusual selections of people. Statisticians conventionally argue that researchers should have 95 per confidence that the association is not random. The humped shape of the normal distribution indicates that the mean value of the variable in the sample is going to be close to the population mean whereas the chance that it is far from the mean is much less. The 95 per cent confidence level is convenient because it is just under two standard deviations (typical deviations) from the mean or average level and also is the point at which the normal distribution becomes flat. Survey researchers calculate the probability and most computer packages routinely produce a figure. If the figure was 0.04, for example, researchers would believe that the association has not occurred by chance. But the ease with which computers run these tests makes researchers forget to examine the strength of the associations, which show how much one variable affects another. In large samples, such as those in excess of 4,000 respondents, it is easy to find significant but meaningless relationships.

Qualitative researchers often question whether variables are genuinely independent or dependent as the structure of causation is usually complex. For example, there may be no relationship between wealth and volunteering because wealthy volunteers tended to go to schools which encouraged voluntary activity. The causal relationship between schooling and volunteering makes the correlation between wealth and volunteering spurious because wealthy people go to a certain type of school which also produces volunteering as well as good examination results. But such relationships are not a problem for quantitative researchers because they can use multiple regression to examine all the determinants of vote choice (see below). This technique allows them to test whether other factors than wealth affect voluntary activity.

Of course, the structure of causal relationships can become even more complex. For example, the existence of marginal Westminster seats causes governments to direct public resources to them (Ward and John 1999), but the receipt of those resources will affect which areas are going to be marginal seats in the following election. Over time, how can a researcher know what level of resources it takes to win marginal seats? To answer the question there is a branch of statistics, called structural equation models (SEM) (Schumacker and Lomax 1996; Maruyama 1998) and software packages, such as LISREL and AMOS, can estimate the causal relationships. Researchers solve the problem that causal relationships are complex by using more sophisticated models and by applying advanced statistical techniques. As always, theory specifies the direction of the causal arrows rather than the computer or technique. Critics, however, would be right to point out that research on political attitudes does not pay enough attention to causal relationships and tends to present models with one dependent variable and a batch of independent ones. For example, an edited volume based on the 1997 British Election Survey (Evans and Norris 1999) does not contain one causal model although it is likely that the bundle of attitudes, reports of behaviour and personal variables have complex logical sequences.

The other common objection to testing hypotheses from using correlations presented in tables is that they do not establish causation but only show associations. Unlike natural scientists, the claim is that political ones rarely carry out experiments, so they have no way of knowing whether the relationships they observe in their data are accidental, spurious or causal. Theory comes to the aid of the social scientist because a relationship between two variables needs to be logical and consistent as well as following from existing empirical studies. The association between wealth and volunteering is not a correlation found by 'dredging' the data, but derives from sociological theory that argues that as some people have more resources and advantages than others so they are more able to engage with public life. The relationship is logical in the sense that background can affect political participation; it is plausible because investigators compare the SES with other models, such as the rational choice model of participation or models that emphasise contextual factors, such as education or the neighbourhood.

When researchers appraise hypotheses they are not satisfied with observations of relationships in the data. To support their case they would look for other relationships to make a set of plausible arguments. They might be interested in change over time; they could run multivariate and structural equation models as indicated above. Just like detectives on a case, quantitative researchers gradually piece together the evidence. At all times they are aware of academic communities of reviewers and conference

participants who are likely to be sceptical about the results. They think of the likely criticisms and devise strategies about how to convince the sceptics. Rarely do quantitative researchers claim that an association in the data proves causation, but that correlation has importance only when applied by theory and used alongside other evidence.

Multivariate analysis

As the wealth and volunteering example shows, researchers need to move beyond cross-tabulations if they are to convince academic communities that they have found new facts. In a complex world, there are many causes of action, and politics is no exception. Researchers do not aim to show that x causes y, but that x causes y alongside or controlling for z or w. Analysts become more confident of testing hypotheses because they have allowed for all the possible causes of behaviour or attitudes. They can run one model against another and carry out robust tests of each one. However, multivariate analysis carries more risks than descriptive statistics because the regression models that social scientists commonly use make restrictive assumptions about the data.

The most common multivariate model is ordinary least squares (OLS). The intuitive idea is that a plot of the points between two interval variables, X and Y, may contain a relationship. If the points are not randomly distributed, it may be possible to plot a line that minimises the distance between it and the data points. This line would have a gradient or slope that indicates the constant relationship between the two variables. Rather than eyeballing the data, OLS uses a formula to estimate the slope of the line from the mean or average value of the independent variable and from the data points. In addition, OLS estimates the distances between the regression line and the data points, what are called the residuals or errors. OLS calculates the total explanation of the model as a statistic, the r-square, which falls between 0 and 1. The same mathematics govern models with more than one independent term. This neat extension allows the estimation of the effects of each of the independent terms upon the dependent variable. OLS allows researchers to test hypotheses in the knowledge that they are controlling for all the hypothesised effects.

Because OLS assumes the data are a sample from the population of possible data points, everything that the model does not explain is random variation. For each variable there is a standard error or measure of spread that indicates the probability that the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is there by chance or not. Political scientists have been happy to run hypothesis tests based on the 95 per cent confidence level. If the probability is equal to or greater than 95 per cent,

researchers accept that an independent variable has an effect on the dependent one; if it is less then they reject the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship. The procedure easily tests models that derive from social science theory. Political scientists specify their models, which usually postulate a relationship between a dependent and independent variable; then they find data from the correct population, conceive of all possible determinants of the dependent variable; and then run a model with all the variables in which they are interested. This procedure appears to correspond to the scientific method because investigators allow the variable of interest to pass or fail a test and they report whether it succeeded or not.

When non-specialists read quantitative articles they may come away with the impression that political scientists only test models that derive from theory. But even with a small number of independent variables, there are many choices about which ones to exclude or include in the final model. These choices should be driven by theory, but sometimes theory provides arguments and counter-arguments for a number of models. For example, researchers could include all or some of the independent variables in the final model irrespective of whether they reach the 95 per cent confidence level or not. Alternatively, they could include only those variables that reach the required significance level. Moreover, the number of choices increases if researchers include interaction effects. These are terms created by multiplying two variables to indicate a joint impact on the dependent variable and they may be included along with the original independent terms (Friedrich 1982). In many situations, it does not matter which model to run as all of them show the same kinds of relationships and levels of probability. But competing models can show the hypothesised variables to be significant and sometimes not. Researchers may be tempted to present the one that shows the hypothesised variable to be above the 95 per cent confidence level. With the speed of current computers and the easy manipulation of software packages, modellers can engage in the much-despised practice of 'significance hunting', which involves running many hundreds of equations until the 'right' one emerges. Because journal editors cannot require researchers to report every model they run, it is hard to detect this practice.

The incentive to present the most favourable model exists because few journals publish papers containing negative results. Most journal editors and reviewers find these papers to be less interesting and less publishable than those that reach positive conclusions; alternatively there is self-selection at work whereby researchers only send off papers to journals when they have positive results. The alternative explanation is that political scientists choose to carry out and research councils usually fund research projects that are likely to yield new findings. In the natural

sciences the bias has been studied and is called the 'file drawer problem' (Rothenthal 1979; Rotton *et al.* 1995; Csada *et al.* 1996; Bradley and Gupta 1997).

Qualitative researchers may become suspicious that advanced statistics creates a screen behind which the modeller 'cooks' the results. When practice breaches the stereotype of the pure model of scientific investigation, the effect is something of a fall from grace. The quantitative researcher becomes like Gabriel inhabiting the dark depths of malpractice. Rather than a devious manipulation of data, the art of building models involves the assessment of different possibilities or pathways, each of which is trailed with theory. Researchers think about what is going on in their models and go back and forth between theory and the results they produce. Along the way is much dialogue – often internal, but also with colleagues along the corridor and across the Internet. Such conversations show that quantitative research is above all problem-centred. Problems and solutions are continually traded amongst the research community to overcome the many pitfalls. A folklore of practices emerges and complex networks link together researchers. Researchers engage with their data. They neither test pure models; nor do they 'dredge' for significant results; but they carefully consider each equation and come up with plausible explanations of the routes they have chosen.

The dialogue continues in the more informal workshops, though it becomes hidden by the time investigators submit their articles to learned journals. After the publication of research the discursive aspect of the production of knowledge starts again. Back along the department corridor researchers discuss results of papers with varying degrees of scepticism or respect that draws upon their knowledge about their data and about the people involved. Members of the research community often detect 'cooked' models because they cannot understand how researchers arrived at their results. When researchers find they cannot replicate the results of a paper, this knowledge gradually diffuses to affect the reputation of the investigator. The informal control may become formal when an academic questions the findings of another by publishing a comment, to which there are often replies and rejoinders.

Recent developments have assisted the transparency of data collection and analysis. King (1995) has campaigned for a standard of replication, whereby any person may repeat another scholar's work using the same data set and coding of the variables. Such a standard has now been adopted by the main US journals. The ability to replicate not only guards against the false presentation of data, which is anyway rare, but it ensures that researchers carefully check their data for mistakes. Replication encourages researchers to consider the steps toward the presentations of their final results and to check the 'health' of their models, such as for

breaches of the assumptions of OLS. As a result, the standards of reporting have improved and most articles in good journals convey at least some of the vast range of diagnostic statistics, rather than just r-squares and probability values. This caution is wise, as King (1986) shows that the r-square statistic can be misleading, making 'macho' comparisons of its size rather meaningless. For example, the r-square can increase by including more variables in the model rather than because of any real improvement in explanation. Similarly, stepwise regression has now fallen into disuse. Stepwise is a facility on some of the more popular software programs, such as SPSS, which allow the researcher to 'race' their variables by automatically discounting non-significant terms or including significant ones in each equation.

The current wave of reforms could go further as there is a range of tests that researchers can apply to the 'interior' of their regression models (Franzosi 1994). For example, it is common that one case in a model can cause a variable to be significant, and researchers need to find out why this is (sometimes it is caused by a data entry error). There are tests of the contribution each case makes to the final model, which help the researcher to understand what is going on inside the 'black box'. Moreover, political scientists could consider abandoning some of the shibboleths of their art. The most sacred is the 0.05 and 0.01 significance tests (or 95 and 99 per cent confidence levels) that can lead researchers to reject or accept a hypothesis because the probability exceeds or does not reach the required level only by a small margin. But there is no theoretical reason why these rules should exist. Tanenbaum and Scarbrough (1998: 15) suggest that they derived from the period before computers automatically calculated the probability values and researchers had to look up the values in printed tables. Researchers should be forbidden from adding asterisks to the variables in models they publish to indicate that a variable has 'passed' a significance test. They should only report the standard errors and the probability levels and discuss them in the text. Such a practice would not be so satisfying for the researcher, but it would lessen the file drawer problem and lead to a more balanced and nuanced discussion of research results. Psychologists have already conceived of life beyond significance tests (Harlow and Mulaik 1997) and a discussion has begun in political science (Gill 1999).

Beyond ordinary least squares

For the bulk of the postwar period the OLS model held sway, particularly as it is taught as the central component of most political science methods

courses. Most well-trained political scientists understand its output. In spite of its ease of comprehension, OLS has disadvantages. It is worth recalling that the model depends on ten assumptions that are frequently breached in most contexts, one assumption being that the variables are constant and linear over time and space (Wood 2000). For example, studies of the effects of the economy on voting behaviour often assume there is a particular level of unemployment that causes a particular amount of unpopularity for a government, but in fact unemployment can sometimes be damaging for a government and sometimes not. To cope with the complexity of political phenomena, a variety of statistical techniques have emerged that supersede OLS.

Radical alternatives to OLS respond to its questionable assumption that everything that the model does not explain must be random. In many research situations the residuals are not randomly distributed because the number of cases is too small, for example, with studies that use the developed countries as the units of analysis. Monte Carlo simulation is an experimental technique that allows the investigator to estimate a variable and to make inferences to the population. It needs vast amounts of computer memory to generate data from an artificially created population that resembles the process being investigated. Then the researcher estimates a statistical model from this population and assesses its performance. Political scientists use bootstrapping models that are similar to Monte Carlo simulation and relax the restrictive assumptions of the OLS model (Mooney with Duval 1993; Mooney 1996; Mooney and Krause 1997), arguing that the OLS model only developed because of the limitations of computational capacity and now the microchip revolution makes other forms of estimation possible. Bootstrapped estimators are available on statistical packages, such as STATA, and articles now appear with reports of both OLS and bootstrapped estimates.

Conclusion

This chapter shows the complexity and subtlety of quantitative work. Far from being mindless 'number crunchers' testing unrealistic models, researchers who use large numbers of observations are acutely aware of the context and character of their data and the assumptions that underlie statistical models. Whether through descriptive statistics, tabulations, OLS or non-parametric models, quantitative researchers immerse themselves as much in their data as their qualitative counterparts. Imagination and intuition have their rightful place in the craft of quantitative analysis. Moreover, a highly critical research community exists to appraise and scrutinise the methods that investigators deploy.

In the spirit of a subtle defence, this chapter criticises some of the practice of quantitative work, such as the tendency to present results too cleanly and to hide much of the messiness of data analysis. More improvements still can be made. A culture shift would acknowledge the importance of exploratory data analysis and accept that it is just as correct to infer a model from the data as the other way round. As Tanenbaum and Scarbrough (1998) argue, the revolution in the speed of computers and the ease of using software packages could help researchers and students utilise the benefits of exploratory data analysis as they can flexibly handle and present data. However, the space in journals is a constraint on the possibilities for elaboration. It is also tedious to read articles that recount 'how I did the research' with tales of blind alleys and mistakes. But much has already been achieved through the campaign for a replication standard and the new culture of resistance against 'cookbook' data analysis. At the same time as political methodologists campaign for more transparency, rapid advances in statistical techniques, made possible by the speed of modern computers, have transformed the field. Quantitative researchers now seek to be both more advanced in their methods and more comprehensible to a non-technical audience.

Further reading

- The beginner should start with a textbook on statistics, such as Wonnacott and Wonnacott (1990).
- More fun is the irreverent *How to Lie With Statistics* (Huff 1991).
- Then there are the introductions to quantitative methods in political science: Miller's (1995) chapter in the first edition of *Theory and Methods in Political Science*; the classic book by Tufte (1974); and recent introductions and reviews (for example, Pennings *et al.* (1999); Champney (1995); Jackson (1996)).
- In addition, there are many general treatments for the social sciences (for example, Skinner (1991)).
- More advanced readers should read the excellent volume edited by Tanenbaum and Scarbrough (1998).

Chapter 11

Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods

MELVYN READ AND DAVID MARSH

In the past it was common for researchers to reject certain methods out of hand, often because these methods did not fit with the researcher's implicit or explicit epistemological position. Happily, such a position is now much less common. Most empirical researchers acknowledge that both qualitative and quantitative methods have a role to play in social science research and that, often, these methods can be combined to advantage. Of course, individual researchers must decide which are the best – that is, the most appropriate – methods to use to address the particular research in which they are interested (see Devine and Heath 1999: 200). Overall, the quality of any piece of research is most likely to be affected by the appropriateness of the research design and the skill of the researcher; slavish adherence to particular methods carries few rewards.

This chapter focuses upon some of the issues involved in integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. It is divided into four substantive sections. The first section briefly questions the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods. The second section begins by identifying the move towards the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods before briefly looking at ways in which these methods can be combined. Subsequently, the third section outlines some of the problems that need to be acknowledged by advocates of such an integrated approach. In the final section we present two brief case studies which bear on the use of such an integrated approach: the first deals with the analysis of private members' bills in the UK House of Commons; the second examines research into changes in bureaucratic structure in Britain.

Quantitative and qualitative methods: a false dichotomy?

Traditionally, in political science, quantitative and qualitative methods have been used by different researchers, to study different things and to

answer different questions. However, is there really a clear distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods? Or has a damaging false dichotomy developed between the two research methods?

In our view, while there are differences, these can easily be over-emphasised. One of the problems is that the distinction, whilst widely used, is rarely discussed and it seems to be merely assumed by many commentators. Following Hammersley (1992) it is possible to identify five putative distinctions between quantitative and qualitative data research, most of which have their origins in the links between epistemology and methodology:

1. Quantitative methods are more often used by authors who are in ontological terms foundationalists and in epistemological terms positivists. In contrast, those who use qualitative methods are, most often, ontologically anti-foundationalist and usually follow a non-positivistic epistemology (see Marsh and Furlong, Chapter 1) .

2. As such, most researchers who use quantitative methods view social science as analogous to natural science; their aim is to produce causal explanations, and preferably scientific laws, about the relationship between the social phenomena being studied (see John, Chapter 10). In contrast, those preferring to use qualitative methods see social science as a distinct and differentiated discipline because it involves subjective objects – reflexive human beings.

3. It follows that those who use quantitative analysis focus on *describing* and *explaining* behaviour, while those utilising qualitative methods are more concerned to understand the *meaning* of such behaviour to those people being studied.

4. Quantitative researchers tend to adopt a deductive approach, using a theory to generate hypotheses, which are then tested empirically. In complete contrast, researchers who utilise qualitative analysis use their inductive empirical analysis to generate interpretations or under-standings of the social world.

5. Quantitative analysis often deals with large amounts of data which researchers analyse using statistical techniques. Qualitative research differs as it generally makes use of fewer cases (or smaller amounts of data).

However, Bryman (1988: 93) argues that, whilst these differences should not be underestimated, academic discussion on these two research traditions has tended to create a somewhat exaggerated picture of their difference and theoretical irreconcilability. In his view, there is nothing inherent in the properties of the different methodologies which prevents

their use by researchers who are operating from different epistemological positions (see also May and Williams 1998; Abel 1970; or Hammersley 1992). In the practical world of political research, the distinctions which are deemed so integral in theory can become blurred or sidelined. So, in practice, most positivists will not stick rigidly to their epistemological position. They will recognise that there are some differences between natural science and social science and that the interpretations that actors have of their own actions are important in formulating a fuller explanation (see Hammersley 1992: 46). Positivists will therefore disengage from their methodological heritage and use qualitative research when quantitative analysis is not possible or is inappropriate.

For example, a positivist political scientist designing a large survey about people's attitudes towards a particular issue, such as confidence in the Prime Minister (UK) or President (USA), might initially interview a small number of respondents in order to generate more appropriate questions for the main questionnaire which is ultimately intended to discover the views of a representative sample of the population.

Similarly, a quantitative study of voting in the USA Congress may reveal patterns of voting that are difficult to explain in terms of the variables used in the quantitative study (such as party, gender, constituency character-istics, size of majority). In these circumstances, interviews with the members of Congress would probably produce a much fuller explanation by focusing upon their own explanations of why they had voted in a particular way.

Non-positivists will also use quantitative data. At the very least, many of them wish to make claims that have a quantitative basis, perhaps that a particular discourse is dominant, or that a particular interpretation of action is 'typical' or common (see Rhodes and Bevir, Chapter 6). More obviously, many realists would argue that the pattern of structured inequality which exists within a society like the USA, acts as a major structural constraint/enabler (that is, it enables the privileged and con-strains the disadvantaged). So, political activity occurs within a pattern of structured inequality that has a crucial (although not always directly observable) effect on policy outcomes (on this see Marsh 2002). It is not important here whether we accept this view, but it is clear that these realists would utilise quantitative analysis to establish the extent of structured inequality.

At the same time, while most relativists or social constructivists do not use formal quantitative analysis, they can do so. So, those anti-founda-tionalists who use discourse analysis as a key methodological tool (this approach tends to emphasise the importance of texts, for example, official documents, party programmes, texts of speeches, interview transcripts, or

even photographs or movies) in order to identify the nature and extent of power relations can use computer programs to analyse texts and identify patterns of linguistic use (perhaps to discover how often gendered language is used), without compromising their ontological and epistemological position.

Therefore, quantitative and qualitative methods are not in and of themselves necessarily tied to a particular ontological and epistemological position. Other factors affect researchers' decisions as to which methodology to use: 'This is not to say that one's paradigmatic stance is unimportant in choosing a method; nor is it to deny that certain methods are usually associated with specific paradigms. The major point is that paradigms are not the sole determinant of the choice of methods' (Reichardt and Cook 1979: 16).

In particular, the nature of the research problem plays a crucial role. So, if we wish to study patterns of political participation in Britain, then this interest inevitably suggests the collection of a sizeable data set, composed of the questionnaire responses of a representative sample of the population, and their analysis using statistical techniques. However, even here the researcher may wish to follow up the quantitative research with interviews with a particular subset of the sample, perhaps in order to discover how young people understand politics and political activity.

At the same time, there are many practical issues that may affect a researcher's methodological decisions. So, cost considerations may preclude large-scale quantitative work, while the funding organisation's preferences may push researchers towards quantitative research. Then again, many researchers may have methodological preferences that are driven as much by their areas of expertise as by methodological considerations, although of course the two are related.

Equating positivism with a deductive approach and non-positivism with an inductive approach also involves significant oversimplification. Put simply, it is evident that all researchers use both inductive and deductive approaches in constructing explanations or developing understanding. In all research we move from ideas to data and from data to ideas (see Hammersley 1992: 48–9). So, rational choice theory, which is perhaps the classic example of a deductive model in social science, is based upon assumptions about preferences that are derived from prior empirical analysis. Similarly, most non-positivists are concerned to generate conclusions from their data (few believe that data are self-explanatory, although most believe that they are capable of a variety of interpretations), which then may be used to generate future research questions.

Even the most obvious distinction between quantitative and qualitative data, that quantitative analysis involves large data sets which are usually

analysed using statistical packages, while qualitative analysis involves a small number of cases analysed in more depth, is questionable. There is no doubt that when we think of quantitative data we think of large-scale surveys, perhaps attempting to explain voting patterns or changing rates of political participation, or the analysis of government statistics. Similarly, when we think of qualitative data we think of interview material, content analysis, participant observation, vignettes, life histories and so on. However, it is not true that all quantitative data sets are large, or that all qualitative data sets are small. Neither is it true that statistical analysis is only performed on what are normally understood as quantitative data. So, sophisticated regression analysis can be conducted on few cases (perhaps as few as 25). At the same time, there is no reason why interview data cannot be analysed using quantitative techniques; so we might undertake a content analysis of interviews with different sections of the population to compare the use of gendered or racially-inspired language. Similarly, we might undertake a content analysis of various official documents or of politicians' speeches to establish how often globalisation is mentioned and whether, in these documents/speeches, there is a dominant discourse that presents globalisation as a constraint and argues that the nature of this constraint means that the government has no alternative but to pursue neo-liberal economic policies.

Overall, in our view while the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is useful heuristically, we must not overemphasise the differences between them. In particular, the link between epistemology and methodology is important, but far from determinant. We cannot say that positivists never use qualitative data or that all non-positivists reject quantitative analysis. Indeed, evidence from research practice suggests that the traditional philosophical division between quantitative and qualitative methods is increasingly becoming viewed as a false dichotomy.

Combining research methods

The move towards methodological pluralism

In the twentieth century, social science was dominated by quantitative methods, particularly survey methods (Finch 1986: 1). It is not difficult to understand this preference for quantitative research as it was associated with the dominance of positivist informed political science (such as the behavouralist or rational choice approaches: see Sanders, Chapter 2, and Ward, Chapter 3). At the same time however, those who funded research,

such as government agencies, regarded quantitative research as more legitimate because of its claims to be 'scientific'. Such research generated 'hard', 'objective', 'statistically significant', findings in contrast to the 'soft', 'subjective', product of qualitative research. The fact that much funding of social science research comes from the government, in one guise or another, and that they are usually interested in social science research as a basis for 'problem-solving' legislation, merely reinforces this preference for quantitative methods. The problem of course is that the existence of such a dominant paradigm has conditioned both funders and practitioners into a particular way of thinking about the process and product of research.

Of course, the dominance of quantitative methods did not go unquestioned and for most of the postwar period there have been two camps, with researchers exclusively using either quantitative or qualitative methods and, at the same time, denigrating the use of alternative methods. In particular, at the height of the behavioural revolution in the 1960s and 1970s many social scientists questioned the utility of qualitative research, although few went as far as Kerlinger who claimed that: 'there's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0' (cited in Miles and Huberman 1994: 40). Even now, it is not unknown for behavioural researchers to claim that qualitative methods have very limited utility (for one recent example, see Dowding 2001). Similarly, more recently, the postmodern turn in sociology (see Rhodes and Bevir, Chapter 6) has led many to reject quantitative methods because, as we saw, it is argued that they are based upon the foundationalist claim that there is a world 'out there' which can be truthfully and accurately captured by utilising appropriate quantitative methods. In contrast, as Denzin argues (1997: 8), the anti-foundationalist 'doubts all criteria and privileges none'. Such researchers have little, if anything, to say to behaviouralists utilising quantitative methods.

However, there was some interest in attempting to integrate quantitative methods even in the 1950s (see Trow 1957). This move has grown apace in the 1980s and 1990s and the traditional view that there is a gap, even a gulf, between qualitative and quantitative research, which means that the methods should be used independently of one another, is now regularly challenged (see previous section). Hammersley's view that each has a crucial role to play in extending our understanding of the topic under consideration is now becoming widely shared. Others endorse the view that all available techniques should be used to add power and sensitivity to individual judgement in understanding the environment being studied: 'why throw away anything helpful?' (see Miles and Huberman 1984).

Why and how to combine methods

It seems to us that there are two main reasons for combining methods:

- First, it may be that using one method does not allow the researcher to address all aspects of the research question.
- Second, many researchers argue that combining methods increases the validity of research, because using a variety of methods means that one method serves as a check on another.

It is this second justification which dominates in the methods literature, but we should not neglect the first reason.

Those researchers who focus on the search for increased integration talk in terms of methodological triangulation; Denzin (1970) calls it a 'triangulated perspective'. Actually, Denzin rejects the utility of a simple distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods. Rather, he identifies five separate methodologies: (1) surveys; (2) interviewing; (3) documentary analysis; (4) direct observation; and (5) participant observation. In his view, a completely triangulated investigation would make use of all these methods, but its basic feature is the combination of two or more different research methods in the study of the same empirical issue (Denzin 1970: 308).

Denzin also distinguishes between triangulation within methods and triangulation between methods. However, it seems to us useful to subdivide his second category. If we take the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods seriously, and recognise that this distinction has resonance in epistemological terms, then we can distinguish between combining different quantitative methods or different qualitative methods and combining qualitative and qualitative methods.

Triangulation within methods

This form of methodological triangulation is very narrow and involves the use of different tools to measure a particular variable. So, a particular variable, perhaps political participation, will be measured using different indicators, the assumption being that the different measures provide a form of triangulation. As Denzin points out, this is no more than a variation within the use of a single method and the inherent problems of single-method research remain (1970: 307). Even so, such triangulation may have its uses because, if different ways of measuring a variable, for example participation, do not affect its relationship with another variable, say education, then this adds validity to any conclusions about the relationship between the two.

The use of different quantitative or different qualitative methods

Here, the scope is broader and the justification of the use of a variety of methods is often a practical one. As an example, a quantitative researcher may wish to explain the changes in the support for a government in the opinion polls over time. In this case the opinion polls would be the source of data on: the party preference of a representative sample of voters; their views of government performance (most likely their views as to which party can be most trusted on health, education, the economy and so on); and their expectations of their own future economic well-being (in the literature this would be called their personal economic expectations). However, the researcher will want to know which independent variables combine to provide the best model of changing government popularity and the opinion polls only provide data on some of those variables. So, the data on variables that deal with actual government economic performance – unemployment, inflation, bank rate, government expenditure levels and so on – will be collected from various government publications reporting these statistics.

At the same time, different qualitative methods may be used where one method does not deal with all aspects of the research question or where combining methods in this way increases the validity of findings. So, to take an example already discussed, we might undertake a content analysis of some government documents to establish how the government views the problem of globalisation and how far they see it as constraining their autonomy particularly in relation to the pursuit of economic policy. In addition, we could interview ministers, civil servants or government advisers about the issue, asking them how far they think economic globalisation has progressed and how far they see it as a constraint on their autonomy. The aim would be to discover and explore any inconsistencies between the two data sources.

The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods.

The issues here are similar. The aim is either to address aspects of the research question that the exclusive use of either quantitative or qualitative methods cannot cover or to add validity to results produced by one or other method. So, if we return to our example of political participation research, in-depth interviewing of a limited number of young people can be used to gain more understanding of how people view politics and 'the political'. These responses could then be used to generate a questionnaire to administer to a representative sample of young people. On the other hand, the researcher may already have a questionnaire, perhaps because they are following up prior research and looking at change in participation over time, that is administered. Subsequently, there may be an intensive

study, using in-depth interviews of a sub-sample, to help the researcher understand or clarify some of the responses to the questionnaire.

In a similar vein, a researcher may begin by undertaking qualitative work, using interviews; participant observation or vignettes that reveal an interesting result. They may then wish to see if that result is more generalisable, either by interviewing a representative sample of the population they are studying or by using a survey method. Of course, this example is really little different from the first example raised in the last paragraph. The only likely difference is an epistemological one. In the prior example it is likely that the researcher is essentially a positivist using qualitative methods as an ancillary method. In contrast, in the second example the researcher is more probably a non-positivist who, nevertheless, is interested in establishing the extent to which the understanding/interpretation of their small sample is shared in the wider population.

In our view, whichever type of methodological triangulation is used, providing it is used in a way that is sensitive to the epistemological issues, can add to our knowledge and understanding of the relationships between social phenomena.

Modes of combination

Creswell (1994) argues that combining methods can take three basic forms: a two-phase design; a dominant/less dominant design; and a mixed methodology design. We have touched upon each of these designs in the prior discussion, so a brief exposition will suffice here.

Creswell's first model is a two-phase design approach in which the study has conducted separate qualitative and quantitative phases. In this approach, in each separate phase the researcher can operate within the appropriate epistemological paradigm and this goes some way to meeting the criticisms of methodological triangulation by researchers who only operate within one paradigm, using one method (1994: 177).

Padgett (1998), unlike Creswell, discusses the issue of the temporal sequencing of this two-stage approach. She distinguishes between designs in which the qualitative study comes first and designs where the researcher starts from a quantitative analysis. As we saw earlier, in the first type of design the qualitative analysis is 'exploratory' and is used to inform the content of the quantitative study. The advantage to the researcher is that the validity of the concepts, hypotheses and questions is enhanced because they are devised following an intensive study of a sample of the population being researched (Padgett 1998: 128–9). In the second type of design, the findings of the first study provide the starting point for a qualitative study. Here, the view is that the statistical analysis of survey data does not allow

us fully to explore the meanings that respondents attach to responses or actions, whereas in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of respondents will allow the researcher to construct a fuller explanation of those responses/actions.

Cresswell's second model is the dominant/less dominant design. Here, the researcher adopts an approach within a single dominant paradigm with a small component of the overall study drawn from the alternative paradigm (1994: 177). The advantage of this method is that it retains a single consistent paradigm, but allows other data to be collected from a smaller or larger population, depending on which methodology is dominant. Again, Padgett develops this schema introducing the two temporal sequences discussed above.

Cresswell is most committed to the third model, the mixed-methodology design (1994: 177), which he argues can be used at any stage of the research process. In his view, such an approach not only adds complexity to the research design but also allows the researcher to take advantage of each research methodology and offers, perhaps, a better reflection of research practice because it uses both inductive and deductive approaches (1994: 178). Padgett concurs, arguing that: 'the mixed-method approach is worth the effort. When both methods are given their due, a study can be enhanced greatly by their synergy' (1998: 134). At the same time, however, she draws our attention to the difficulties that adopting this approach entails, requiring researchers to compromise in the way that they work.

Problems of combination

Although combining methods is increasingly the orthodoxy, it is not a process without problems. The key issue returns us to the question of ontological and epistemological differences. How important are these differences and how do they impact on methodology? In essence, there seem to be three answers to these questions. First, many authors ignore ontological and epistemological issues and their links to methodology, merely focusing on the empirical question in which they are interested. It is clear from our earlier discussion that we see that position as untenable (see also Marsh and Furlong, Chapter 1). In our view, ontological and epistemological positions are crucial in social science and any researcher must be aware of their position. Second, authors like Hammersley (1992), Cresswell (1994) and Padgett (1998) recognise the differences, but play them down. Here, the view is that it is possible for both positivists and non-positivists to use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the same research project in any combination and without privileging one or the other. In this view, the third mode of combination outlined by

Cresswell is both possible and preferred. A third position argues that ontological and epistemological positions serve as a skin, not a sweater, and that there is a clear link between ontology, epistemology and methodology. This view deserves more attention because it really takes us to the core problem of combining methods.

In this view a researcher cannot hold to two different positions at the same time or within the same research project (although of course, as was argued by Marsh and Furlong in Chapter 1, at the margins there is considerable overlap between the positions). If we utilise both quantitative and qualitative methods we must ensure that we are doing so in a way that does not compromise our basic ontological and epistemological position. We cannot be a positivist when we are collecting and analysing quantitative data and an interpretist when we are analysing qualitative data. In this view, one's ontological and epistemological position affects all aspects of the research process.

Devine and Heath (1999) explore some of these issues. They argue that:

[A researcher's epistemological position] will probably determine the research questions which that researcher is prepared to consider in the first place and in turn will influence the extent to which methodological triangulation will lean more towards one tradition than another. (1999: 204)

So, we would expect positivists to be more interested in research questions that lead to the production of generalisable results: questions which point to the use of qualitative methods. In addition, even when positivists use qualitative as well as quantitative methods and thus engage in what the literature terms 'data triangulation', the qualitative data will usually be ancillary to the quantitative data.

However, there is another important point that the Devine and Heath quote misses. Different researchers are likely to interpret their data, whether quantitative or qualitative, differently depending on their epistemological positions. More specifically they are likely to make different claims about their results. The positivist will see their results, if they involve a representative sample, as generalisable and, in a sense, as 'true'. In contrast, a relativist would see their results as offering only one possible interpretation of the social phenomenon studied.

In this view, the first and third modes of combination outlined by Cresswell are highly questionable, so the best possible mode is the second one. In effect, this view would argue that we are most likely either to be a positivist using qualitative methods as an ancilliary to quantitative ones, or a non-positivist who uses qualitative methods as an ancillary to qualitative ones.

One other point is important here, before we move on to the, more minor, logistical problems of combination. If we use methodological triangulation to test the validity of results, what happens if the different methods produce different results? Of course, if money was no object, the first response of a researcher might be to replicate both the quantitative and the qualitative research. If this still produced differing results, then a good researcher might ask why. However, in most cases the positivist, quantitative, researcher would doubt the validity of the qualitative analysis, perhaps arguing that the numbers involved were too small, the sample not representative or the researchers incompetent. At the same time, the non-positivist, qualitative, researcher might argue that the quantitative analysis was unsophisticated and not sufficiently fine-grained. Such problems are probably impossible to resolve, because the positions taken reflect epistemological differences. This issue is clearly evident in the second case study discussed below.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the logistical problem involved in combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. First, there is often a resource problem. Large-scale surveys cost a great deal of money; large-scale in-depth interviewing costs even more. A combination of the two might be prohibitively expensive. Second, few researchers have the varied skills necessary to undertake sophisticated statistical analysis on large data sets and in-depth interviews. This may mean that a team with varied skills needs to be assembled, but that, again, is expensive, and any such team needs to avoid endless epistemological arguments.

Two case studies

The final section looks at two case studies of research that involve the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods: the first deals with voting on private members' bills in the UK House of Commons; and the second focuses on explanations of the changes which occurred in the structure of the British civil service in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

The fate of UK private members' bills

The study of private members' bills in the UK is of interest for two reasons. First, legislative proposals for reform on key moral issues, such as abortion, divorce and homosexuality, are normally introduced under this procedure because governments have been reluctant to become identified with a particular stance on what are usually regarded as vote-losing issues. Second, unlike in the USA, party discipline is very strong in Britain. Almost all the House of Commons divisions that are unwhipped (not dictated by a

party line) occur on private members' bills, so, if researchers wish to study what factors, other than party discipline, affect voting, then they have to focus mainly on private members' bills.

Studies of private members' bills tend to focus on one of two questions: why some bills pass while most do not; and what factors affect MPs' voting on such issues. We shall look in turn at how quantitative and qualitative methods have been used by Marsh and Read (1988) to address both questions.

Marsh and Read (1988) provide the fullest study of private members' bills to date, although there are other more recent studies of voting on these unwhipped (non-partisan) issues (see especially Pattie *et al.* 1998). Using Hansard, they examined the fate of all bills introduced in the postwar period, classifying them according to: what topic they dealt with; how far they progressed; whether the bill was voted on and, if so, what the votes were; whether the bill received government support; and whether the bill was given extra, that is, government, time. These quantitative data were supported by interview data with most of the MPs who introduced private members' bills in two Sessions, 1979/1980 and 1980/1981. In these interviews MPs were asked why they introduced a particular bill, what contact they had with government and how they dealt with the constraints that the private members' bill procedure imposes on the fate of a bill.

The quantitative data was crucial because it showed that no controversial private members' bill that has not received government time has passed since July 1977, when extra time was provided by the Labour Government to enable the Lords' Amendment stage of three bills to be completed. As governments are now very reluctant to give time to private members' bills, the bills that pass are minor and technical. Time is of the essence because the procedure does not prevent MPs who oppose a bill from filibustering it (that is, talking it out). There is no equivalent in private members' business to the guillotine which the government can use to curtail debate on its bills.

However, the qualitative data also add to this explanation. It is usually possible to trace the government's attitude to a particular bill by using Hansard, because, in the Second Reading debate on any bill, a government minister usually makes a speech in which they outline the government's response. But, this is not always so and it may be necessary to interview particular MPs. At the same time, it is rarely possible to discover from Hansard whether a particular bill has in fact originated with the government. So, it was only through in depth interviews with MPs that Marsh and Read discovered that many of the successful private members' bills are government bills in all but name; minor, uncontroversial bills provided by a government department to an MP who draws a high position in the private members' ballot. In addition, Marsh and Read undertook inter-

views with some MPs who filibustered particular bills. A reading of Erskine May, the bible of parliamentary procedure, sensitises the researcher to some of the intricacies of the private members' bill process, but, without interviews with those MPs who piloted bills through the process and those who oppose bills, it would be impossible to understand how that procedure can be, and is, used.

If anything a consideration of research on voting on private members' bills reveals even more clearly the advantages of combining methods. Marsh and Read (1988) analysed the voting records of MPs on abortion, capital punishment and the decriminalisation of homosexuality between 1965 and 1980. Their aim was to discover which factors had most influence on MPs voting on unwhipped issues. They utilised a multivariate ordinary least squares regression analysis (1988: 86), to establish both which of a number of political and demographic variables (including party, size of majority, religion, gender, age, social class and so on) had the most explanatory power and how well an explanatory model could be produced by combining the effects of the independent variables.

Their main finding was that party was by far the best predictor of vote, even though there was no declared party line on these issues. Generally, Labour MPs were liberal on these social issues (so voting pro-choice on abortion, against capital punishment and for the liberalisation of the homosexuality laws). The other key finding was also unsurprising. Religion had an influence on voting on abortion, but not on the other issues. So, while almost all Labour MPs took the liberal position on capital punishment and homosexuality reform, Catholic Labour MPs invariably voted for tougher abortion laws. Despite these results however, Marsh and Read concluded that relatively few quantitative variables affect voting on these issues and that much of the variance on voting cannot be explained using these statistical models.

To explore the voting patterns more fully, Marsh and Read used qualitative methods, interviewing MPs and interest group activists. Their argument is that, in order to explain MPs' votes, we need to understand much more about the political context of each vote. As just one example, 77 per cent of Conservative MPs voted for the Second Reading of the 1967 Abortion Bill, while 66 per cent of those MPs opposed it at the Third Reading. It is impossible to explain this difference on the basis of Marsh and Read's quantitative analysis. However, interviews and the scrutiny of interest group documentation make it clear that the formation, and activities, of an anti-abortion interest group, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), after the Second Reading, together with increasingly visible opposition from sections of the medical profession to abortion on 'social' grounds, persuaded many Conservative MPs to change their votes. Marsh and Read conclude that: 'while statistical analysis can

provide an important basis from which to embark upon an explanation of voting a fuller, more adequate, explanation involves a much more detailed consideration of the political background to, and context of, the votes' (1988: 107).

In this case then qualitative research was used to explore aspects of the research question that the quantitative research could not address. Both the quantitative and the qualitative data contribute to an explanation of the fate of private members' bills and the voting behaviour of MPs on unwhipped issues. In our view, no positivist would have any problem with combining methods in this way. Similarly, most non-positivists would have few problems in using the quantitative analysis, although in explaining the votes they would clearly focus more on the MPs' understanding of the issues involved and the strategic context within which they vote.

The changing structure of the British civil service

This case study is rather different. It does not report an example of the successful combination of methods. Rather, it focuses on how two different methods, essentially quantitative and qualitative, have been used to examine the same problem: how to explain the changes that occurred in the British civil service in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Of course, these methods might both have been used in the same research project, but, as we shall see, there are important epistemological issues involved with this type of combination.

Dunleavy (1991) is critical of the mainstream public choice explanation of bureaucratic change, the budget maximisation model, which argues that the main interest of senior bureaucrats is in maximising their budget, because a larger budget will mean greater status and higher salary for the bureaucrats. In contrast, Dunleavy develops a bureau-shaping model that is based on the assumption that senior bureaucrats are most interested in maximising the status and quality of their work. For this reason, senior civil servants may be quite happy for their bureaux to shrink in size, as a result of the hiving off of troublesome and routine managerial work, if that means they can focus on more interesting work, especially providing policy advice to ministers.

Dunleavy uses aggregate data about the patterns of expenditure on different budgets and in different types of bureaux in order to test his bureau-shaping model of change in bureaucracies over time. These data are taken from government statistics. On the basis of this analysis Dunleavy argues:

Senior policy-level officials have generally agreed on the need to separate out their existing under-managed and under-prioritised executive roles,

so as to allow them to concentrate on their key priorities of providing policy advice to ministers, managing relations with Parliament, organising legislation and regulations, and moving money around ... (1991: 463)

It is possible to test the bureau-shaping model using other methods. We could interview a sample of the bureaucrats in a given bureau, or a series of bureaux, and ask them about the changes that had occurred and why they acted in the way they did. The results of the two methods could then be compared, allowing us an additional test of the validity of Dunleavy's model. If a representative sample of the civil servants in a particular bureau were interviewed, then these data could be treated as quantitative; if not, they would be more likely to be regarded as qualitative. Of course, this reflects back on our earlier argument that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data is not a self-evident or easy one.

Marsh *et al.* (2000) take another approach. They focus on the major change in the UK bureaucracy which began in the 1980s: the creation of the Next Steps agencies. This change meant that the British civil service shrank significantly in size as most executive functions of British central government departments were transferred to separate agencies. As such, the departments were much smaller and their work focused on policy advice. *Prima facie*, this development would seem to confirm the Dunleavy model.

Actually, the bureau-shaping model would generate three hypotheses concerned with this development: first, that senior civil servants have less interest in the management of their department than in providing policy advice; second, that the development of agencies was encouraged by senior civil servants; and, third, that the outcome of these changes has been to allow senior civil servants to focus on the policy advice function. Marsh *et al.* (2000) test these hypotheses using extensive interviews with retired and serving senior civil servants who had been involved with the changes. Their sample is not representative and they treat their interviews as qualitative, rather than quantitative, data. So, they do not report the numbers of interviewees who gave particular responses and use quotes from the interviews to give a flavour of how these civil servants experienced and viewed the process.

Marsh *et al.*'s interview data do not confirm the bureau-shaping models explanation of that change. Rather, they suggest that: some senior bureaucrats value their management function as highly as their policy advice function; that the creation of the agencies was driven by politicians, not bureaucrats, and, indeed, opposed by some senior civil servants; and that, since these developments, very senior civil servants are less, rather than more, involved in giving policy advice.

As we said, neither Dunleavy nor Marsh *et al.* combine methods, but it would be perfectly possible to do so. Many would also argue that such an approach could have advantages. For example, it is clear that Marsh *et al.*'s qualitative study could be seen as providing a test of the validity of Dunleavy's explanation. However, there is a major epistemological problem here.

Dunleavy is a positivist and for him this has strong methodological implications. As we saw, he relied almost exclusively on quantitative data about bureaux budgets. He did not interview civil servants or politicians about their preferences or strategic judgements, The implication is that such data are 'soft' because they may reflect a bureaucrat's *post hoc* reconstruction of decisions: interviewees may be mistaken or lying about their preferences and reasons for particular behaviour. In contrast, Marsh *et al.* are realists who argue that we need to know how civil servants understood the situation and their choices if we are to develop a fuller interpretation of the changes.

The key point is that if both methods confirm the same result then two researchers, albeit operating from different epistemological positions and with different methodologies, may agree. However, if the two methodologies produce different results or suggest different conclusions, then the researcher will almost inevitably privilege one set of results dependent upon their epistemological and methodological preferences.

Conclusion

In our view, the key characteristics necessary for high quality research are a good research design and an excellent researcher/research team. As Devine and Heath argue:

> Good [social science] research requires integrity on the part of the researcher, a willingness to face difficult questions, an openness to new and different ideas, an acceptance that some strategies of research can go wrong, an ability to adapt to different ways of doing things and so on. The way in which practical, ethical and political issues arise in all research demands pragmatism, but it is a pragmatism which is systematic and vigorous. (1999: 18)

As such, researchers need to be flexible and adaptable and this involves using quantitative and qualitative methods when appropriate. In addition, all must take ontological and epistemological issues seriously and for many this means that combining methods can only occur within one epistemological position. However, perhaps the most important point in our view is that, while it is possible to distinguish 'good' research from 'bad',

whichever method or combination of methods is used, the criteria of judgement will not be the same (see Devine and Heath 1999: 209). So, for example, the positivist undertaking quantitative work will make judgements based on the reproducibility and generalisability of research results; criteria which have little or no relevance to the relativist undertaking qualitative analysis and acknowledging that there can be competing interpretations of the same data. It is important not to argue that there is only one way to do social science and that a single set of criteria can be established to judge 'good research'.

Further reading

- On qualitative research, see Silverman (1997), Mason (1996) and Devine and Heath (1999).
- For quantitative methods in political science, see Miller (1995); the classic book by Tufte (1974); and recent introductions and reviews such as Pennings *et al.* (1999), Champney (1995) or Jackson (1996).

Comparative Methods

JONATHAN HOPKIN

Introduction

Despite the status of 'comparative politics' as a disciplinary sub-field, comparison and the comparative method are used implicitly or explicitly across political science and the social sciences in general. Comparison serves several purposes in political analysis. By making the researcher aware of unexpected differences, or even surprising similarities, between cases, comparison brings a sense of perspective to a familiar environment and discourages parochial responses to political issues. Observation of the ways in which political problems are addressed in different contexts provides valuable opportunities for policy learning and exposure to new ideas and perspectives. Comparison across several cases (usually countries) enables the researcher to assess whether a particular political phenomenon is simply a local issue or the professional academic's Holy Grail, a previously unobserved 'general trend'. But perhaps the principal function of comparison in political science is that of developing, testing and refining theory. This chapter will therefore focus on the relationship between theory and the comparative method and the problems involved in designing comparative research.

Theory and the comparative method

As many disgruntled comparativists have pointed out, 'comparative politics' is often taken to mean simply 'the politics of foreign countries' – this is certainly the meaning used in the book reviews section of the *American Political Science Review* and in the organisation of political science departments in the United States, and to some extent elsewhere. Ironically, much of the research carried out under this rubric is not comparative at all, consisting instead of narrow, 'idiographic' studies (studies which are limited to particular cases or events), often of individual countries. In fact, use of the comparative method is by no means

constrained by such institutional conventions. Instead, as 'one of the primary means for establishing social scientific generalizations' (Ragin *et al.* 1996: 749), it can, and indeed should, be used in 'nomothetic' studies (studies which seek to demonstrate 'law-like' theoretical claims) of social and political phenomena.

Testing theories

The comparative method offers the most obvious route to testing theoretical propositions in political science. In the natural sciences, the 'replication' of results is the key form of control of theoretical statements: if a dependent variable X is claimed to be caused by a combination of independent variables Y and Z, then experiments can be carried out to test whether the presence of X is always accompanied by Y and Z, and whether Y and Z are always accompanied by X. If these results are replicable, even under a variety of conditions, the theory receives strong empirical support. Replicating results and manipulating conditions in political science is never so straightforward, since creating 'laboratory conditions' in order to test theories is almost always impossible. To take an example, the study of democratisation for a long time revolved around a debate about the relationship between economic development and democratic political institutions, with 'modernisation theorists' arguing that economic development was a precondition of stable democracy (see, for instance, Lipset 1959; Huntington 1968). Perhaps the best way to test this theoretical statement would have been to take a sample of developing and developed countries and impose democratic institutions on some of them and dictatorships on others, and observe the consequences. If the democratic institutions operated successfully in the developing countries and unsuccessfully in the developed ones, for instance, then that would have falsified the theory in its most basic form, suggesting a need for revision or even abandonment of that particular line of argument. Unfortunately for political science, choices about political institutions have generally not been delegated to academics seeking to test their theories. Instead, researchers must adopt the comparative method to make imaginative use of observations of the state of the world as it is if theories are to be subjected to empirical control. As the analogy with the physical sciences suggests, this associates the comparative method as it is commonly used in the social sciences with a positivist epistemological position (as defined by Marsh and Furlong in Chapter 1).

The debates surrounding the issue of democratisation provide useful illustrations of how the comparative method can be used to test theory. One of the earliest works in this tradition, Lipset's classic *Political Man* (1959), employed a quantitative comparative approach to demonstrate his

claim that economic development and its social and cultural by-products were a condition of stable political democracy. Lipset took a large number of indicators of economic development and compared these indicators over a large number of countries, democratic and not. The results showed a clear relationship between democracy and high levels of economic development across a large number of cases, lending support to the generalisation that wealth is a necessary condition of democratisation. Subsequently, more statistically sophisticated analyses have used a variety of quantitative techniques to assess how closely these two variables are related across the world, with differing results (for a review, see Vanhanen 1997).

Other authors have adopted a rather different approach to this debate, using more qualitative and often historically-informed research into just a few cases to assess the origins of democratic regimes. A classic example in this tradition is Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), which studies in great detail the historical paths to democratic or non-democratic regimes in a relatively small number of countries. Unlike the rather simple theoretical claim which emerges from the quantitative research such as Lipset's – economic development causes democracy – Moore's explanation of democratisation is more complex, considering a larger number of independent variables, such as social class, economic structure and state power, and looking at the way in which these variables interact with each other as well as their direct impact on the dependent variable. Much of the literature on the so-called 'Third Wave' of democratisation since the 1970s has taken this more qualitative approach, carrying out comparisons of more limited scope across particular sets of rather similar countries (for example, O'Donnell *et al.* 1986; Di Palma 1990; Pridham 1990; Pridham and Lewis 1996).

Why compare?

This distinction between these two types of comparison – often referred to respectively as 'large N' (many cases) and 'small N' (few cases) research – highlights the different ways in which political scientists can confront the problem of how best to test theories ('replicate results') in the absence of our own 'laboratory'. As this chapter will show, there are formidable problems in properly testing political science generalisations in a stubbornly complex world. However, there are two reasons why these problems cannot be avoided. First, if political science is to generate general propositions about political life, there is no alternative to comparison. Here, the discipline is divided between those who believe that universal 'covering laws' governing political behaviour exist, and can in time be identified, and those who believe that social phenomena are either too

unpredictable and contingent to be explained in terms of such laws, or too complex and immeasurable for such laws to be identified. A sustained comparative research effort, and probably also a lot of luck, will be needed if any covering laws are to be convincingly empirically verified.

A second and less obvious reason for comparison is that it is necessary to assess the validity of our interpretations of specific or even unique political phenomena (King *et al.* 1994). There may be any number of different explanations of a single phenomenon and choosing between them requires the theoretical underpinnings of each explanation to be assessed, and if possible, tested comparatively. As the Italian political scientist Angelo Panebianco (1990: 511) has commented, it is very easy to blame Italy's Catholic tradition for many of the country's problems, and a very compelling account of recent Italian history could be constructed on this basis. However, the most cursory comparative overview would reveal cases where a strong Catholic tradition does not appear to have provoked the same problems. This may require the explanation to be abandoned, or refined by taking other variables into account. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher's diagnosis of Britain's economic ills in the 1970s tended to focus on the purported strength of the trade unions, responsible for inflationary pressures, and the country's supposedly indulgent welfare state, which discouraged effort and initiative. However, neighbouring countries such as the Scandinavian social democracies had stronger unions and more generous welfare states, and yet were comparatively economically successful. Even when we are aiming to provide explanations of specific phenomena, comparison is essential if the theoretical foundations of these explanations are to come under adequate scrutiny. The validity of 'idiographic' studies cannot be established unless they are complemented by 'nomothetic' studies, and the theories proposed by nomothetic studies must be confronted with the evidence through comparative 'checking' (Sartori 1994).

Basic forms of comparative explanation

Comparative explanation takes different forms (Mill, 1875; see also Ragin 1987: 36–42; Peters 1998: 28–30).

The 'method of difference'

The 'method of difference' involves studying two very similar cases, which differ only in respect of the variables whose relationship to each other one is studying. To use Mill's example (1875: 472), if we were interested in establishing the beneficial effect of commercial protectionism on national

prosperity, then we would have to find two cases similar in all respects except that one was rich and had protective tariffs, and the other was poor and espoused free trade. As Mill pointed out, even if such a clear causal relationship did exist, finding two cases similar in every respect except these two variables would be impossible. Alternatively, the 'indirect method of difference' would require a third case (or more) to be sought out, similar to the first in a number of respects, and to the second in others. If this third case was also open to trade and poor, the theory would receive further support; if however it was open to trade and rich, the theory would have to be revised.

The 'method of agreement'

The 'method of agreement' is the opposite of the 'method of difference': the two cases should differ in every respect except the variables being studied. So, to use the same example, the two cases should be completely different in every circumstance, except that they are both protectionist and both rich, in order to confirm the theory.

The 'method of concomitant variables'

Finally, the 'method of concomitant variables' seeks to identify variables which seem to move more or less contemporaneously in the hypothesised direction; so if a protectionist country began to open up its borders to trade, and soon after entered into economic decline, then trade openness could be seen to have an effect on prosperity, all other things being equal.

This phrase, 'all other things being equal' (sometimes referred to in its Latin form *ceteris paribus*), is at the heart of the difficulties Mill saw in the use of these various methods of comparison. In political and social life, all does not remain equal when two variables change, and it is often empirically impossible to pin causes on to a particular effect. For example, it could be the case that our hypothetical protectionist country adopted free trade in response to political pressures from an emerging commercial rival and that its decline in prosperity was the result of this new rival gaining an advantage in key international markets. If this was the case, then free trade in itself would not be the cause of the economic decline; instead free trade and economic decline could *both* have been caused by the third variable: the emergence of a new commercial rival. To argue that free trade caused economic decline would therefore be 'spurious'.

This problem of 'extraneous variance' (Peters 1998, 30–6) – variance caused by factors outside the theoretical proposition being examined – is a serious obstacle in comparative research. In part, this is because social and

political life in modern, mass societies is so complex, and any attempt to develop reasonably parsimonious theory will neglect potentially important explanatory factors. Moreover, in the example used in the previous paragraph, variables such as countries' trade policies cannot be easily separated from other variables, such as the balance of power between the various productive groups in society, the nature of political interaction in that society, or its position in the world and the rise and fall of other trading nations. Finally, as Mill clearly understood, the world is unlikely to provide political scientists with sets of cases which are the same in all respects except those we wish to study, or different in all respects except those we wish to study. Empirical reality is instead rather messy and political scientists can only limit, rather than eliminate, extraneous variance through careful research design.

'Most similar' and 'most different'

One influential response to these problems was provided by Przeworski and Teune (1970), who distinguished between 'most similar systems' and 'most different systems' research designs. In the 'most similar systems' design, which they identified as being predominant at that time, the researcher chooses cases with many similar features, so that most variables will be 'held constant' and cannot be adduced as causes of any differences between them (this equates to Mill's method of difference). This narrows down the number of potential explanatory variables and facilitates the empirical checking of explanations. Like Mill, Przeworski and Teune argued that this design was not particularly helpful, as there will almost always be enough differences between cases to 'overdetermine' the dependent variable, making it difficult to establish which differences are key and which are not. For example, Britain and the United States are often described as belonging to an 'Anglo-Saxon' category of countries, sharing such features as a liberal political tradition, two-party systems and first-past-the-post electoral laws, emphasis on free market economics, and so on. These shared characteristics clearly cannot explain any differences between the two, such as, for example, why a strong working-class party (Labour) emerged in Britain but not in America. However, there are so many potentially relevant differences between the two countries – parliamentary versus presidential government, monarchy versus republic, medium-small population versus large population, relative ethnic homogeneity versus ethnic heterogeneity – that it is impossible to establish exactly which of these differences has causal significance, although some will be more plausible candidates than others. Neither can this problem be avoided simply by using more cases to eliminate potential explanatory variables. There are simply not enough cases to find the right combination

of similarities and differences to test theories, a difficulty often referred to as the 'too many variables, too few countries' problem (Lijphart 1971).

For this reason Przeworski and Teune argued strongly that the 'most different systems' approach was preferable. This approach draws from Mill's 'method of agreement' and seeks out similarities between cases in spite of the potentially confounding differences between them. The understanding behind this approach is that, if a hypothesised relationship between two or more variables is replicated across a wide variety of different settings, then there are stronger grounds for arguing that there is a causal link between the variables. This implies that attention should be shifted from the 'intersystemic' level, where variables such as the type of political regime are often examined, to the 'intrasystemic' level, in the hope of eliminating system-level variables (such as the political regime) from the inquiry and establishing generalisations valid across different settings. If well-educated individuals are shown to be more likely to vote in elections than the rest of the population in samples drawn from, say, Britain, Russia, Japan, Thailand and Madeira, then we can exclude variables such as the form of the state, the level of economic prosperity, religious tradition, population size and probably many more from a theory on the relationship between levels of education and political participation. Because the 'most different systems' approach requires a sample of cases from a wide variety of settings, the unit of analysis should be at the lowest possible level – individuals, rather than groups or countries. As a result, this approach implies a preference for 'large N' (a large number of cases) rather than 'small N' (a small number of cases) research (Hague *et al.* 1998: 281).

Large *N*s: quantitative comparative strategies

Large *N* research using quantitative techniques is currently the dominant form of empirical control in some of the most prestigious political science journals (see Chapter 10). The aim of most quantitative comparative work is to assess the relationships between a given dependent variable and one or more independent variables across a large number of cases, using various statistical techniques (leading Charles Ragin to describe it as a 'variable-oriented approach' (1987)). Context is not so much 'controlled for' as dismissed from the analysis, on the basis that if a given relationship holds across a variety of contexts, then context cannot be so important. The aim of large *N* research is to establish robust and parsimonious generalisations about social and political life, focusing on communalities (concomitant variation) rather than differences between cases.

Quantitative research tends to focus, not surprisingly, on quantifiable variables: concepts that can be measured numerically, such as levels of

electoral participation, the annual product of an economy, the numbers of people unemployed, and so on. However, other types of variables can be and are used in such analysis: dichotomous variables (such as whether a country is a democracy or not, or whether an individual is male or female), ordinal variables (such as whether an individual is left-wing, centrist or right-wing); or nominal variables (such as the different ethnic categories individuals are sometimes placed in). The nature of statistical techniques does however tend to push researchers to focus on quantifiable variables, with the result that variables are often chosen for their amenability to statistical analysis rather than any *a priori* relevance to the research problem being addressed. Most worryingly, researchers are often guilty of adopting inappropriate empirical indicators of a particular variable. For instance, the level of institutionalisation of political parties is extremely difficult to measure, leading researchers to adopt a range of indicators which rarely capture the degree of organisational solidity of parties. Janda (1980) and Mainwaring and Scully (1995) have both adopted parties' longevity as a measure of institutionalisation; however, although most 'older' parties are likely to be more institutionalised than very new parties, this does not automatically follow. Indeed, such a measure would have suggested that the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), founded in the nineteenth century, was very strongly institutionalised by the early 1990s, even though it collapsed and went out of existence in 1994. If an indicator does not measure the variable it is meant to measure, then the results of statistical analysis are bound to be unreliable (Dogan and Kazancigil 1994: 48).

The debate on the economic prerequisites of democratisation, which was mentioned earlier, has spawned a number of examples of quantitative comparative research. Lipset's analysis in *Political Man* (1959) used a series of quantitative indicators of economic and social development and assessed their relationship to a dichotomous variable: stable democracy and unstable democracy/dictatorship. Lipset's findings – a close relationship between socio-economic development and stable democracy – were all the more robust because they held across a large pool of 50 countries. This ability to detect 'concomitant variation' across a large number of different contexts is an important benefit of using quantitative comparison. One interesting feature of Lipset's study is that he did attempt to hold some variables constant (the capitalist economy and a broadly 'Western' cultural heritage) by limiting his analysis to Europe, Latin America and the English-speaking world, and by distinguishing between Latin America and the rest on the dependent variable. This latter move shows how the use of nominal variables can exaggerate the 'fit' between independent and dependent variables: the level of economic development in some European non-democracies was higher than that of some Latin American democracies,

but by treating Latin America separately this anomaly was hidden away (Diamond 1992: 94). Still, the use of a fairly large number of cases allowed Lipset to show that a relationship between economic development and democracy held across a wide range of different contexts. His conclusion, that industrialisation, urbanisation, wealth and education were closely interrelated, and that a composite index of economic development combining these variables was itself closely related to political democracy, is a classic example of the use of quantitative analysis to produce parsimonious political science generalisations valid over large numbers of cases.

Other scholars have built on Lipset's work using even larger Ns. Diamond (1992) tested the Lipset hypothesis with new data from 142 countries, taking advantage of the much wider availability of data sets in the 1990s. Diamond's research used different variables and different indicators. His explanatory variable was a measure of broad material well-being: the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index, a composite variable consisting of adult literacy, life expectancy, and *per capita* gross domestic product. For the dependent variable, Diamond replaced Lipset's democracy/dictatorship dichotomy with an ordinal variable of 'democraticness' (measured on a seven-point scale) drawn from Freedom House's annual survey of political rights and freedoms in the world. Using this approach, Diamond was able to show a correlation coefficient between development and democracy of 0.71, suggesting that around half of the variation in the 'democraticness' of regimes can be predicted by the variation in their material quality of life (by squaring this correlation coefficient and multiplying by 100 we can generate, as a percentage, the proportion of the variation in the dependent variable predicted by the independent variable: in this case 50.41 per cent).

These studies, and many others in the same tradition (for example, Cutright 1963; Moore 1995; Vanhanen 1997), provide an insight into the advantages and drawbacks of the quantitative comparative approach. On the one hand, they do provide strong empirical support, accumulated over a period of time and using a range of data sets and statistical techniques, for the generalisation that economic development, broadly understood, is related to democracy, broadly understood. That these findings can be replicated through comparative analysis of very different cases, following the advice of Przeworski and Teune, strongly suggests that the relationship is a causal one. Empirical support for such a parsimonious theory would have taken much longer to assemble and may well have been less compelling, if quantitative analyses had been shunned. Similar techniques have been used to study, to name but a handful of examples, the relationship between political parties and public policy outcomes (Castles

1982), the impact of electoral systems on party politics (Lijphart 1994) and the impact of globalisation on the sustainability of social democracy (Garrett 1988). However, the quantitative comparative literature in political science also reveals some important limitations of the approach.

Limitations of the quantitative comparative approach

Limited cases

One of the most obvious limitations is the paucity of available cases and the even greater paucity of available data on cases. Przeworski and Teune's recommendation to focus on individual-level data is difficult to apply to research on many of the concerns of political science, such as the role of political institutions, or the formulation of public policies. If we want to study the impact of electoral systems on party politics, there are relatively few cases of electoral systems (for example, Cox (1997) takes 77 country cases). This problem can be surmounted to some extent by using periodisation within each country to 'create' more cases (so each election in each country becomes a case). But even so, the results of statistical analysis are likely to be less reliable than in the cases of survey data, where samples will sometimes include thousands of individuals.

Limited data

A further problem is that the selection of cases is inevitably driven by the availability of data, so much quantitative analysis does not follow the 'most different systems' approach at all. Lijphart's study of electoral systems (1994) is limited to 27 mostly European or English-speaking democracies. Garrett's study of globalisation and partisan economic policies (1998) takes eleven West European states, plus the USA, Canada and Japan, as its cases. This tendency to compare the advanced economies is justifiable on practical grounds: these countries have the most reliable official data, which facilitates statistical research, and indeed the greatest number of political scientists, which makes collaborative research possible. Hophever, they are also very similar in a number of ways and their relative similarity may make it difficult to make parsimonious causal statements about patterns between variables. The easy availability of data, rather than careful research design aimed at maximising 'experimental variance' (Peters 1998) and either maximising or minimising extraneous variance, tends to drive case selection.

Data reliability

Moreover the apparent reliability of such data may itself be misleading. The studies by Lipset, Diamond, and Garrett cited here all paid great attention to per capita gross domestic product (GDP) as a measurement of economic success. Per capita GDP measures the market value of the total goods and services produced in a given economy over a given period (a year), and is widely used by economists, political scientists and indeed politicians as an indicator of wealth. However its apparent quantitative precision is deceptive, for a number of reasons: for instance, it fails to capture economic production which is not monetarised (housework, the black economy, much agricultural work in some countries); it is often calculated in US dollars and is therefore distorted by the fluctuations of foreign exchange markets; and, much more broadly, it may measure wealth, but it is not a good measure of welfare (Dogan 1994: 44–5). Moreover, because it is an 'official' statistic calculated by governments, among others, GDP is perhaps afforded a reliability it may not deserve. By changing its estimates of the size of the black economy in the mid-1980s, the Italian government increased its calculation of GDP to such an extent that it shifted from being rather poorer than the UK to being rather richer overnight. Similarly, the unemployment statistics used in cross-national studies may take into account the differences between the way headline figures are calculated in different countries, but do not attempt to gauge the extent to which different governments use various tricks to drive figures down. In the 1980s, British governments made abundant changes to the ways in which unemployment figures were calculated, almost all of which reduced the total. In contrast, Spanish unemployment figures in the same period were universally recognised, even by the domestic opposition parties, as being artificially high.

Careless conceptualisation

Further problems (not restricted to quantitative analysis) are posed by careless conceptualisation. To take, once again, the debate on economic development and democracy, conceptual vagueness and inconsistency pose a serious threat to the validity of empirical generalisations about the relationship between these two variables. Not only is economic development sometimes inaccurately measured (see the previous paragraph), but also the very meaning of economic development remains unspecified. Are we talking simply about wealth, or about factors which create wealth? Wealthy countries have much in common, but are not identical: some have strong manufacturing sectors, others rely heavily on the service sector. These differences in economic structures have implications for social

structure, and therefore for the impact of economic development on politics. Economic development could impact on politics through any number of different variables (availability of material goods, levels of education, levels of property ownership, density of population, newspaper readership and so on), and many studies have failed to define the concept carefully, thus risking the validity of their theoretical conclusions.

Similarly, and even more problematically, democracy is not always carefully defined. So many varieties of democracy have been identified (see, for example, Katz 1997 and Weale 1999, for just two recent typologies) that the concept has reached a level of generality which makes meaningful comparisons difficult. Does economic development promote majoritarian or consensus democracy (Lijphart 1999), or both? The difficulties involved in measuring concepts such as 'democracy' may lead scholars simply to grab whatever indicators are available (see, for example, Vanhanen 1997), without necessarily stopping to ask whether these indicators truly measure the properties of the concept under examination. This poses the danger of 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori 1970), where concepts are so inadequately defined that they fail to discriminate. Sartori (1994: 19) has used the amusing story of the 'cat-dog' to make this point. (This involves a hypothetical study of a furry quadruped mammal which in 50 per cent of cases makes the sound 'miaow' and in the other 50 per cent the sound 'woof'.) The concept of democracy, if it is employed to describe, say, the United States, Sweden, Colombia and Russia, may become as useful as the concept of the 'cat-dog'.

In short, comparative politics is exposed to the dangers of what Dogan calls 'overquantification': he argues that 'in the last two decades an important advance has been achieved in statistical methodology that has not been matched by equivalent progress in data collection and retrieval' and identifies an 'increasing gulf between data and method' (1994: 37). Quantitative analysis is clearly an important element in comparative research, but care must be taken to ensure that the conceptualisation and measurement of variables are taken as seriously as the statistical techniques used to examine the relationships between variables. In view of its limitations, there is a strong case for combining quantitative with qualitative analysis whenever possible (see Chapter 11; for a recent example of such a strategy, see Boix 1998).

Small *N*s: qualitative comparative strategies

Although influential early advocates of quantitative analysis favoured the 'most different systems' approach, the trend since the early 1980s has been for the scope of comparison to become increasingly narrow, focusing on

particular regions or types of cases (Mair 1996: 317). For example, much comparative political economy research pays little attention to nations outside the OECD (for an exception, see Lane and Ersson 1997). In this sense, much of the quantitative work published in contemporary political science implicitly relies on the 'most similar systems' research design often used in 'small *N*' qualitative comparative studies, which aim to control for some variables whilst detecting concomitant variation in others. This undermines arguments that quantitative design should whenever possible be preferred to qualitative design in comparative research (as has been argued, for example, by Smelser 1976).

Qualitative research of a smaller number of cases is often regarded as a methodologically 'soft' option, inherently less rigorous than quantitative analysis. The apparently greater reliability (all other things remaining equal) of findings resulting from 'large *N*' analysis, and the rather descriptive and methodologically unsophisticated nature of some 'small *N*' and case-oriented research, lend support to such a view. However, there is no *a priori* reason to regard case-oriented, qualitative comparative research as methodologically 'soft', and indeed this approach can provide a far more rigorous and sophisticated response to some types of research questions (see Ragin 1987). The long-running debate around Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) and the subsequent growth of the 'historical institutionalist' strand in comparative political economy in the 1990s, provide numerous examples of influential qualitative comparative research based on small *N*s (often only two or three cases).

Quantity or quality? Quantitative versus qualitative comparative research

It is useful to contrast the qualitative literature with the quantitative comparative work assessed in the previous section. (See Chapter 11 for a discussion of the issues involved in combining quantitative and qualitative research.)

Qualitative comparative research can be distinguished from quantitative comparative research by its 'holism' (Ragin 1987). Whereas quantitative studies are strongly analytic, tending to abstract particular phenomena from their context in order to compare them across cases, qualitative studies look at the phenomena within their contexts, looking at the cases as 'wholes' (complex combinations of variables). So for example, whilst in the quantitative studies of Diamond and others variables such as economic wealth (per capita GDP) are taken to be distinct features of societies whose effect on politics can be isolated in cross-national research, the more qualitative approach of authors such as Moore (1966) or Rueschemeyer *et*

al. (1992) instead considers the multiple combinations of factors relating to economic development. In this view, democracy and dictatorship are best understood in terms of 'multiple conjunctural causation' (Ragin 1987): particular combinations of circumstances at particular points in time can produce particular outcomes. So, for example, a theory of democratisation resting on a linear notion of economic development would find it difficult to explain why Germany, one of the most industrially developed European nations at the beginning of the twentieth century, should have had so much more difficulty in establishing parliamentary democracy than its neighbour France, which industrialised much more slowly.

Qualitative comparative analysis can contribute to resolving such paradoxes, as Barrington Moore's work has shown (1966). Moore studied the trajectories towards modernisation of six major countries (Britain, America, France, India, Japan and China) and isolated the combinations of events and processes ('configurations') which accounted for their success or failure in establishing democracy by the early twentieth century. He paid particular attention to the nature of rural social stratification and the relationships between the landed nobility, the peasantry and the urban bourgeoisie during the process of economic modernisation. His conclusions are often simplified into the shorthand 'no bourgeoisie, no democracy', but in fact Moore's study produces a rather more complex set of arguments. In its most rudimentary form, Moore's argument is that, where the urban bourgeoisie is able to combine with landed interests sympathetic to commerce, then democracy is more likely to result (as in Britain, France and the United States), whereas coalitions between landed interests and dynastic or state bureaucracies will hinder democratic developments, ultimately giving way to fascism (Japan and Germany). Finally, where landed interests and bureaucracies were too weak to hold the peasantry at bay, as in China and Russia, communism resulted (see the summary by Rokkan 1970: 54–7). This analysis provides a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of economic change on politics than the simplistic linear relationships discussed earlier. Moreover, Moore's attention to historical–empirical detail and concern for understanding his various cases as wholes leads to a large number of qualifying statements which refine this theoretical framework. For instance, the development of British democracy cannot be understood solely in terms of the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie; the growth of a commercial-minded land-owning class which took on a similar ideology and mentality to the bourgeoisie is equally important. This shows how qualitative comparative work can negotiate the difficult relationship between empirical complexity and parsimonious theory.

In fact, some qualitative comparative work has fundamentally challenged the notion of political science as the search for parsimonious general statements about political life. For example, the 'historical institutionalist' school in comparative political economy, which to an important extent draws on the tradition established by Moore, uses qualitative comparative analysis to emphasise the particularities and specificities of individual cases, rather than to establish generalisations applicable across large numbers of cases (Steinmo *et al.* 1992). Reacting against the grand theorising of the 'behavioural revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s, historical institutionalists often use comparison to show that large-scale social, economic and political forces can produce divergent outcomes in different countries as a result of the diversity of their institutional arrangements. Peter Hall's *Governing the Economy* (1986) used qualitative comparative analysis to examine the very differing responses of policy-makers in Britain and France to the economic challenges of the postwar period, and explained those differences in terms of the intricate configuration of institutions influencing economic policy in the two countries. Similarly, Sven Steinmo's *Taxation and Democracy* (1993) uncovered unexpected differences in fiscal policy between Britain, the USA and Sweden, which again can be accounted for by the institutional context. This body of research has used comparative analysis to emphasise the complexity and contingency of political phenomena at the expense of parsimonious, deterministic general theory.

Others see qualitative comparative analysis instead as a route to such general theory. George Tsebelis's use of game theory applied to a number of case studies (1990), and the work of a group of rational choice scholars assembled in the *Analytical Narratives* volume (Bates *et al.* 1998), whilst not strictly comparative, suggest such an approach. Whilst some rational choice theorists will tend to use quantitative comparative techniques, others employ case studies which they use to elaborate 'a compelling tale' (Przeworski and Sprague 1986): a reconstruction of a particular set of events on the basis of rational choice assumptions. Unlike the historical institutionalists, this work does not seek out specificities or emphasise contingency; instead, as Levi has argued, 'rationalists in comparative politics are committed to explanation and to generalisation' and 'are almost always willing to sacrifice nuance for generalisability, detail for logic, a forfeiture most other comparativists would decline' (Levi 1997: 20–1). Similarly, many scholars in the tradition of comparative historical sociology see 'historical comparisons as the means to test more general propositions and causal hypotheses about large-scale change' (Katznelson 1997: 92; see, for instance, Skocpol 1979).

As argued earlier, this conflict between nomothetic and idiographic explanation is a characteristic of comparative politics as a field. However, qualitative comparative research appears particularly prone to this 'tension between the generality of theory and explanatory accuracy' (Caporaso

2000: 699). Charles Ragin has argued that qualitative research often involves 'complex, combinatorial explanations' which 'are very difficult to prove in a manner consistent with the norms of mainstream quantitative social science' (1987: 13). Qualitative comparative research tends to explain political phenomena in terms of the combined effect of several factors, and there are usually insufficient cases in which these combinations occur to test such explanations statistically. The key strength of large N analysis – that if a pattern is repeated often enough within a randomly selection population it is unlikely to be a coincidence – is denied to such qualitative small N studies, and the reliability of their conclusions can be challenged on these grounds.

In order to overcome this problem, Ragin has developed a particular method of qualitative comparison based on Boolean algebra (1987). This 'Boolean approach' seeks to explain political phenomena by identifying the combinations of causal conditions present in cases where the phenomenon is verified. Rather than searching for the frequency with which a particular causal relationship can be detected (as in quantitative research), the Boolean approach proceeds by identifying the conditions which are present in every available case of the phenomenon being investigated (*necessary conditions*). It then compares the cases in order to establish whether there is any one factor which produces the phenomenon on its own (a *sufficient condition*). An important difference between the Boolean approach and the statistical approach is that necessary and sufficient conditions can be identified, even when there are very few cases available for study, by using strict logic rather than frequency. It is therefore a useful way of systematically comparing infrequently occurring phenomena (such as revolutions, wars or currency crises, for example) without incurring the kind of descriptive particularism characteristic of some small N studies. The Boolean method is yet to fulfil its potential in political science and most scholars appear unaware of its existence. One exception, which may pave the way to more such studies, is Alexander Hicks, whose recent work on the historical development of welfare states in advanced societies uses the Boolean method to explain why some countries established substantial welfare regimes before others (1999).

The Boolean method, like its rivals, is not without its weaknesses. A significant disadvantage of the Boolean approach is that it requires all data to be presented in binary form, as dichotomous variables. Some data – for example continuous variables, like per capita GDP – are not particularly conducive to such treatment, and researchers have to rely on potentially arbitrary cut-off points in order to contrive a dichotomous variable. For instance, Hicks chooses to measure his dependent variable (early or late welfare state development) by assessing whether four key welfare provisions had been established by a particular date (1920). Although he

provides a convincing justification of this cut-off point, the example does demonstrate a potential problem in the Boolean approach: the measurement of 'artificially' dichotomous variables could be manipulated in order to produce a better 'fit' between theory and data. However, both quantitative comparison and the more descriptive types of qualitative comparison are far from immune to such manipulations, so this is no reason to dismiss the Boolean method, which has many potential applications in comparative analysis. Hicks's study makes the most of this potential through a rigorous empirical examination of welfare state development, which provides detailed expositions of the Boolean logic underlying his theoretical claims.

The extensive and influential research within the qualitative comparative tradition, and the usefulness of qualitative analysis in cases where data are not amenable to statistical treatment, provide abundant justification for this alternative to the current dominant position of quantitative analysis in political science. However, qualitative researchers are perhaps guilty of addressing too infrequently the appropriateness of their research design and the reliability and replicability of their results (King *et al.* 1994). One particular area in which greater care could be taken is the question of case selection (for example Dion 1998): 'selection bias' (the selection of cases which fail to provide sufficient room to falsify hypotheses) and even the failure to justify case selection in methodological terms at all are common features of qualitative comparative studies (although once again the same accusation could be levelled at many quantitative analyses). For instance, the historical institutionalist literature in comparative political economy is replete with comparisons of Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and the USA, but neglects the potentially interesting Southern European cases. Clearly, researchers will always be constrained by the availability of data and language skills, quite apart from the financial resources necessary to study faraway places. However, more careful case selection and research design can still be achieved within these constraints.

Conclusion: challenges to the comparative method

This chapter has described and examined the comparative method as an essentially positivistic methodology (see Chapters 1 and 10). Mill's comparative logic drawn from the logic of the physical sciences, and the positions adopted in classic works in comparative politics, such as Przeworski and Teune's insistence (1970) that comparativists should aim to substitute the names of variables for proper names, point to an epistemological and ontological position quite inimical to interpretism. However, there are good grounds for caution in reaching such a

conclusion; as Barnes has controversially claimed: 'despite a generation of effort, country remains the most common proper name/explanatory variable in comparative politics' (1997: 134). Despite the aspiration to detect theoretical relationships observable in a variety of contexts, often comparativists find that rigorous use of the comparative method is more a means for falsifying grand theories and throwing scepticism at claims that social phenomena in different societies can successfully be compared. As a result, as one comparativist scholar has argued: 'we do not take our theories or our theorists seriously' (Barnes 1997: 239).

This is probably an excessively pessimistic conclusion. The classic comparative studies discussed in this chapter demonstrate the successes, as well as the failures, of comparative analysis, and also show ways in which comparative work can move beyond a narrow positivism (most usually associated with 'over-quantification') to a sensitivity for cultural difference, the role of ideas, and the ways in which political experiences can be socially constructed (Mackie and Marsh 1995). For example, the comparative method can act as a valuable counterfactual control for ideational explanations of political outcomes, as well as for 'materialistic' and positivistic ones (Blyth 1997: 235–6). Here, comparison can be used to 'test' ideas-centred explanations of unexpectedly different outcomes in apparently similar cases, rather than to establish the regularity of particular causal patterns across cases (see, for example, Sikkink's comparison of development strategies in Argentina and Brazil, cited in Blyth 1997). Furthermore, there is plenty of room for theories resting on non-materialistic ontologies to make use of comparison, as a way of establishing the clear differences, or even the non-comparability, between cases. Thus, the scholars Lichbach describes as 'culturalist comparativists' have yet to exploit the potential of the comparative case study as a means of getting to grips with 'value diversity and multiplicity', 'historical particularity, specificity and locality' and understanding 'individuality, singularity, uniqueness and distinctiveness' (1997: 254). Indeed, although the historical institutionalists cited earlier could not be described as 'culturalist' in their approach, much of their work in comparative political economy has sought to emphasise the diversity of response to common pressures between different nation states, a diversity stemming from deeply embedded institutional legacies which condition the choices available to political actors. Comparative research can be as concerned with the peculiarities and the specificities of individual cases as with the search for replicable generalisations.

However, the mainstream of comparative politics remains positivist at heart, employing comparison to (attempt to) replicate theorised causal relationships. Comparativists associated with rational choice theory or structuralist theories tend to downplay the role of ideas, norms and values and emphasise the predictable and deterministic nature of objective material relationships between variables. Quite often this kind of comparison will rely on quantitative comparative analysis, although qualitative comparative analysis designed in such a way as to carefully manipulate the values of variables across cases is sometimes regarded as appropriate. The field at present suffers from self-imposed limitations, as many of the more prestigious forums for the presentation and diffusion of comparative research continue to favour a particularly restrictive understanding of quantitative comparative methodology over alternatives which are equally valid. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have serious flaws and drawbacks and there does not seem to be any good reason for either one of them to have the status of a 'default setting'.

Further reading

- There are numerous introductory books and articles about the comparative method, for example Mackie and Marsh (1995), Hague *et al.* (1998) and Pennings *et al.* (1999).

PART III

ISSUES

Structure and Agency

STUART McANULLA

Introduction: structure and agency – a problem for all?

Over a number of years various prominent social scientists have suggested that the 'structure–agency' question is the most important theoretical issue within the human sciences (Carlsnaes 1992; Giddens 1984; Archer 1996). This debate has been slower to make an impact on political science than on some other social science disciplines. Yet, recently a number of political scientists have argued that structure–agency questions should be recognised as central to the way we study politics (Hay 1995; Marsh 1995; Bulpitt 1996). Fundamentally, the debate concerns the issue of to what extent we as actors have the ability to shape our destiny as against the extent to which our lives are structured in ways out of our control; the degree to which our fate is determined by external forces. Agency refers to individual or group abilities (intentional or otherwise) to affect their environment. Structure usually refers to context; to the material conditions which define the range of actions available to actors.

In political science claims regarding structure and agency are made frequently (though they may not explicitly be described as such). For example, when discussing the US Presidency commentators will frequently make reference to the talents and/or weaknesses of George W. Bush. These are issues of agency: Bush's style, psychology and character are discussed in relation to how effectively he is performing as President. On the other hand, commentators will discuss the external challenges which the US Government faces. These are issues of structure: 'globalisation', international institutions and environmental threats may all be cited as structural trends or conditions which the US Government must react to or act within. They do not choose such circumstances; nonetheless they must act in relation to them. However, they have at least some scope to choose the strategies to cope with these challenges. For example, the US President has certain (however limited) powers to affect economic and environmental change and he must choose how to exercise this power. Many of the key debates in political science revolve around questions concerning which

type of factors, structural or agential, are most important in explaining political events. Some authors focus heavily on studying the behaviour of individuals and groups and their effects on political outcomes. Others tend to focus on structural factors, for example, on the way in which transformations in the economy and governing institutions affect political changes. Consequently, almost unavoidably, any type of explanation offered in political science will adopt a position on structure and agency, though usually only implicitly. Nonetheless, a number of social scientists have formulated quite clear and influential theoretical positions on this relationship. It is the purpose of this chapter to review such positions. In doing so, I shall firstly establish why such questions are significant and respond to common criticisms of this area of debate. I then outline the main positions within arguments regarding structure–agency, beginning with the historical perspectives before moving on to consider more contemporary approaches. Subsequently, I consider the challenges posed to the main positions by postmodernism and draw attention to the need to account for the role of ideas within perspectives on structure and agency. Finally, I discuss what I consider to be the most developed and persuasive position on the structure–agency question and how it overcomes many of the problems encountered in the aforementioned approaches.

Structure and agency: what's really in it for us?

The original edition of this volume contained a chapter by Colin Hay on the question of structure and agency. Whilst the chapter proved seminal, a minority of political scientists questioned why a chapter on this issue was included within a textbook on approaches to political science. Some argued that structure–agency debates were too remote from the central concerns of the political scientist to examine political processes and events through empirical research and/or theory-building. This section seeks to reply to some of the objections frequently heard regarding the importance of the debate to political scientists. Two types of objections are commonplace:

1. The 'structure–agency' debate is a manifestation of a debate, which has dominated and puzzled philosophers for centuries. It relates to the fundamental issue of determinism against free will: to what extent we are products of our environment as against the degree to which we can determine our own future. These debates have perplexed the greatest minds throughout human history. Therefore, the notion that we may find a 'solution' to such issues seems unlikely. Consequently, we may

argue that, though the subject of structure–agency may be of great philosophical interest, it is a highly abstract and possibly intractable debate and, as such, of little use to the practising political scientist.

2. The 'structure–agency' question is of little, if any, consequence. Ultimately, the debate seems to boil down to little more than the common-sense understanding that as people we are constrained by circumstances yet have certain freedom to shape our own future. As such, it is scarcely worth much reflection.

Most objections to the debate broadly fall into the two positions outlined above. Put crudely, one perspective suggests the debate is too complex and abstract, the other that it is merely an everyday truism. Here, I will argue that ultimately both types of objections may be dismissed. However, it is worth looking closely at the nature of each criticism.

Objection Type One: At one level such an objection has strong validity. The structure–agency question does indeed relate to the most perplexing philosophical questions in history. For example, within Marxism the debate has tended to be couched in terms of voluntarism–determinism. However, elsewhere it is reflected in other dualisms, including: micro–macro, individualism–collectivism, subjectivism–objectivism and holism–individualism. Consequently, it may be grandiose, if not foolish, to engage with a debate which is notorious for yielding confusion, even madness. Certainly, I think it would be very problematic to believe that one might find a 'solution' to the problem of structure and agency. One of the key problems is that some contemporary literature on structure–agency, particularly that of Anthony Giddens (see later section), does sometimes seem to suggest that it offers such a solution. In contrast, I believe the debate should not focus upon an effort to find the Holy Grail of a solution. Rather the structure–agency issues should be acknowledged as an *unavoidable problem*. Put another way, it is an issue on which we cannot avoid adopting a position. We can easily, but perhaps not wisely, avoid ever using the terms 'structure' and 'agency', just as we may consciously avoid reading any of the dense philosophical literature relating to it. Yet, as political scientists of whatever kind, we are bound to appeal to some understanding of structure–agency whenever we offer explanation of political events. Whether we are explaining the fall of the Berlin Wall or the rise of feminism we will inevitably make reference to the causal powers of interest groups, decision-makers or protest movements (agency) or contextual factors such as economic recession, patriarchy or the environment (structures). Equally, we will, of necessity, adopt some view on the relative importance of different factors: in other words we will take some view as to the relative significance of structural or intentional factors. Thus understood, we cannot 'opt out' from the structure–agency issue.

Objection Type Two: Again, at one level, we may accept this objection. It is indeed part of everyday experience that we are constrained by conditions around us, but within these we have at least some opportunity to influence our futures. Thus, in a sense we have an intuitive understanding of the importance of both structural and intentional factors in social reality. A couple of points must be made here. First, there are influential bodies of social science literature which would in fact reject this common-sense understanding of the world and, indeed, argue that we should adopt quite different assumptions when actually studying the world (Bhaskar 1994). Put simply, we should not assume that what causes events in the social world is a straightforward matter. As we will see, some authors believe that what individuals do may be a consequence of deep underlying structures which they may have no conscious awareness of (ibid.: 6, 16). Second, even if the everyday understanding of the issue is accepted as valid there are further considerations. Whilst most would sign up to the statement that agency affects structure and vice versa (see later discussion of dialectical approaches) this does not mean that there is agreement about how we actually explain events. Suppose we ask the question: what has caused mass unemployment? Some will answer with reference to economic change (structure), others to feckless, immoral individuals unwilling to work (agency). Ultimately, we are forced to take a stance on the relative importance of different factors. Moreover we are compelled to take a position on the relative importance of structural and intentional factors.

Overall, one can argue that the structure–agency issue is one with which we cannot help but grapple. Rather than seeking a solution to the problem in the way one might look for the answer to a riddle, the best we can do is look for accounts which usefully conceptualise how structure and agency relate. The next section is devoted to examining perspectives which attempt such a task. First, I consider positions which give priority to structure; second, positions which give priority to agency; and, finally, positions which give a crucial role to both structure and agency.

Structuralism

In this section I highlight the significance of positions emphasising structure. First, I consider the rise of the 'structuralist' movement. Second, I consider the more general tendencies within social science towards structuralist explanation.

Structuralism as a 'movement'

Structuralism, as a movement, is generally considered to originate in the work of the linguistic philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's great contribution to the study of linguistics was to insist that language be understood as a system: in other words, that the relationship between words is structured. Thus, he argued, to understand a language is to understand its underlying structure. Subsequently, some authors in other fields began to adopt structure-centred approaches to their research. For example, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss came to argue that societies could be analysed as a system in a manner quite analogous to Saussure's analysis of language. He argued that to explain individual and community action one should attempt to establish the overarching, general rules which affect behaviour. For example, kinship patterns in different societies are seen as resulting from implicit 'kinship systems' that set social rules to which most people will adhere. Lévi-Strauss then, like Saussure, sought to look below the surface meaning of events to discover hidden systems at work.

For political scientists, perhaps the most influential author within the structuralist movement was the Marxist Louis Althusser (see the later discussion of this work). In Althusser's view, social reality is governed by the complex interaction of economic, political and ideological structures which have their own relative autonomy from one another. However, individuals, or agents, have no autonomous power, they only have a role in as far as they are the 'bearers' of structures. Althusser and Balibar state:

> The structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, in so far as they are supports [Träger] of these functions. (1970: 180)

Importantly, structuralists such as Althusser believe that individuals act in accordance with structures that they cannot see, and of which they may have no awareness. Take the example of a female business employee who applies, unsuccessfully, for a senior position within the company. The candidate may explain her lack of success through having a bad interview, or through lacking leadership skills. However, the structuralist would point to the existence of patriarchal structures which effectively exclude women from obtaining high-level positions in most areas of work. Thus, while the candidate may explain her failure through personal weaknesses, she may in fact have been the victim of social structures of which she may be unaware. In other words she may have been blocked by what is sometimes referred to as the 'glass ceiling', a discriminatory structure which acts subtly against the interests of women (remember that one is likely not to be able to see a glass ceiling!) For structuralist authors, everyday concepts such as 'individual power' can be dangerous illusions which obscure the overriding influence of structures.

Structuralism as tendency

Hay argues that, since the 1970s, structuralism is now little more than a term of abuse within social and political theory (Hay 1999b: 38). Certainly, the label 'structuralist' tends to be used by critics interpreting other authors' work, rather than being a term openly embraced by authors for their own work. The label is usually applied to literature, which either privileges, or appears to privilege, the role of structures over the role of agency as explanatory variables. Such literature thus shares key theoretical characteristics with the structuralist 'movement'. Again, the emphasis is on the way unobservable structures either constrain or determine human action. Such structuralist-oriented positions explain political change by examining the development and interaction of structures. Agency is thus reduced to the status of an epiphenomenon. For example, the work of Anderson and Nairn regarding British economic decline is often described as structuralist (Hay 1996). These authors attempt to explain why Britain has slowly lost its former economic power, suggesting this is because the structure of the British state has survived intact in essence since the feudal era. The attempts of some governments to reform these structures have been ineffectual against such embedded institutions. Consequently, actors, such as the UK Government, have lacked the means to address Britain's decline in a rapidly changing world.

It is thus important to make clear that the term 'structuralist' is used as a general term to describe a theoretical tendency. Authors such as Anderson and Nairn would probably reject any description of their work as structuralist. However, it is commonplace to apply the term to work that either precedes or post-dates the rise and demise of the structuralist 'movement'.

The main objection to structuralist literature in general is that it consistently downplays, or even rules out altogether, the possibilities of individuals taking effective action independent of structures. By assigning individuals a role only as the 'bearers' of structures, it implicitly precludes the possibility of people being able to shape the course of history. In the end, structuralism presents a gloomy picture in which individuals exist at the mercy of social structures over which they have little or no control.

Intentionalism

Intentionalism can be seen as an equally prevalent and equally problematic tendency within social science. Within such literature the individual or group is assumed to be the appropriate focus of explanation. Events are primarily explained through reference to the intentions and actions of individuals. The explanatory focus thus is on agency, with structure

this time given secondary status. In other words, 'structure', if it is mentioned at all, is only ever taken to exist as an effect or outcome of individual action.

One can identify a broad and influential 'movement' of intentionalism within political science. Three strands are of particular significance: rational choice theory; public choice theory; and pluralism. Each of these approaches stresses the role of the individual and usually assume that individuals act to promote their own self-interest and personal gain.

Rational choice theory is premised on the belief that individuals will be motivated primarily by the desire to make maximum gain for themselves (see Ward, Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion). In addition it assumes that agents have the ability to calculate what particular actions are likely to benefit them (Bunge 1996: 363). To take an extreme example, imagine Person A sees a stranger drowning in the sea, then jumps in the water to save their life. A rational choice explanation of this would be that Person A has jumped in for his own benefit rather than that of the stranger. It is not concern for a fellow citizen that has motivated him but what he may gain personally by way of glory or reward.

Public choice theory may be thought of as a sub-field of rational choice theory. This literature works upon the assumption that politicians and government bureaucrats will act to maximise their own interests, that is, holding on to power and extending the scope and resourcing of their own area of vested interest. This was a belief held by many of those associated with the Reagan–Bush administrations in the USA who argued that state officials act to benefit their own interests (for example, by arguing for increased spending within their own departments) rather than those of the people.

Although rational choice is a widely used approach, particularly within American political science, it has received strong criticism from many other social science perspectives (see Ward, Chapter 3 and Blyth, Chapter 14). However, there is little doubt that the main weaknesses critics point to are its largely exclusive focus on the role of the individual and the huge assumptions made about the motivations for individual behaviour. For many, it is simply implausible to allow individual action such an autonomous role in explaining events; this overlooks, or at least very much downplays, the importance of social structures in shaping events. To return to the previous example, many would argue that to jump into water to save a drowning man is a selfless act, in that it risks one's own life for no direct personal gain. Such an act may also reflect a concern for others which transcends individual self-interest. It may also be contended that rational choice theory's narrow view of motivation ignores the ways in which people may act according to habit, imitation, external compulsion and impulse. For example, some would argue that saving

a drowning stranger is an instinctive action, rather than a strictly rational one.

Characterising pluralism as an approach is scarcely simple (see Smith 1995). It is generally understood as emphasising the dispersed nature of political power and the notion that, as such, it is impossible for a single group or interest to dominate society. Politics is seen as involving the resolution of conflicting interests. Thus, it is stressed that the analysis of politics is the analysis of groups. Smith argues that pluralism suggests that if groups do not have access to power it is because they have not tried hard enough, or that their interests have not been sufficiently threatened (Smith 1995: 215). It is possible to interpret pluralism as, once again, a narrowly intentionalist creed. Critics are particularly keen to point out that pluralism takes little account of the way in which power may in fact be structured in ways which systematically marginalise or exclude some groups and interests from influence within the polity. For example, some neo-Marxist critics point to the structurally privileged position of economic interests (Poulantzas 1978), whilst many feminists point to the consistent and deliberate exclusion of issues affecting women from the political agenda (Chapman 1995; Pateman 1989).

Dialectical approaches

Contemporary authors have attempted to provide accounts which give weight to both structure and agency. Furthermore, all are concerned to give some understanding of how structure and agency relate to one another and interact. Such positions are usually referred to as 'dialectical' approaches; meaning simply that agency affects structure, but structure also affects agency. In this chapter, I review three dialectical models. In this section I examine two of these approaches, the third is considered in the final section of the chapter. Here, I begin with the work of Giddens, before considering that of Jessop (1990) and Hay (1996), and then looking at the postmodernist position.

Structuration theory

Giddens came to reflect on this whole issue because of his frustration with the tendency of much social science to locate itself on one side or other of this basic structure–agency dualism (Giddens 1979, 1984). Consequently, he attempts to transcend this dualism through what he terms 'structuration' theory. His basic argument is that structure and agency are not separate entities: they are mutually dependent and internally related. Structure only exists through agency and agents have 'rules and resources'

between them which will facilitate or constrain their actions. Giddens, like structuralists, recognises that such structures do *constrain* what individuals can do. However, unlike the structuralist, Giddens argues that these 'rules and resources' also *enable* particular actions. For example, citizens living within the European Union (EU) are subject to particular rules and resources. These constrain people living in the EU: for instance, they may have no option but to abide by decisions reached in the European Court of Justice. However, such rulings can be enabling for citizens. For example, directives on working conditions can help employees take action against employers who force people to work in unsafe circumstances. A key point of Giddens's model is that particular actions can lead to the *reconstitution* of the structure, which will, in turn, affect future action. For example, in the 1980s many European states perceived the need for greater economic and institutional integration in order to be more competitive within global markets. Accordingly, in 1986 member states signed the Single European Act in order (amongst other things) to liberalise economic transactions in Europe. In doing so, they effectively reconstituted the structure of the EU, giving greater powers to supranational insititutions to regulate the European economy. This revised structure then affected future decisions of individual EU states who now had considerably diminished scope to veto decisions reached at a European level. Overall, structuration theory provides a balanced model in which structure and agency closely interact. Giddens's metaphor for this is that, rather than being distinct phenomena, structure and agency are in fact two sides of the same coin.

Giddens's attempt to theorise how structure and agency relate without falling into the perils of structuralism or intentionalism is clearly a step forward. However, structuration theory has also been subject to considerable criticism. Two objections are particularly significant, the first theoretical, the second practical.

1. Many authors argue that whilst Giddens's aim of transcending the traditional dualism of structure and agency may be well-intentioned, it is ultimately unsuccessful (Taylor 1993; Archer 1996; Layder 1997). They believe that Giddens is mistaken in his insistence that structure and agency are mutually constitutive: that they are in fact one and the same thing. This results in what Archer calls 'central conflation': agency and structure are elided or pushed together to the point where the distinction between them becomes meaningless. This means it becomes very difficult to examine the nature of the interrelationship or dialectic between structure and agency actually.

2. Consequently, there is a huge problem in using structuration theory empirically. Giddens's insistence on the mutual constitution of structure and agency means that he is unable within his own work

to give any sense of the practical interaction or dialectic between structure and agency. As Layder states:

> Thus instead of incorporating both agency and structure, Giddens's conception of the duality of structure dissolves them into each other while the analytic focus is trained on social practices. But this is the worst of all worlds since the independent properties of both action and structure are lost to analysis and as a result, the exact linkages between the two cannot be traced over time (Layder 1997: 247).

In his own work, Giddens for the most part adopts an agency-centred analysis, leaving structural or systems-based analysis for other work. Critics argue that this is indicative of the inadequacy of structuration theory which offers no obvious guide as to how it may be applied in practical research (For a critique of Giddens' definition of structure and his practice of 'methodological bracketing' see Hay 1995: 198).

The strategic–relational approach

A second dialectical understanding of the structure–agency relationship can be found within the work of Hay (1996) and Jessop (1990). Their position is particularly relevant for political scientists as the 'strategic–relational' approach was developed in the context of Jessop's work on theorising the state. The state is one of the most crucial areas of study within political science and much of the debate on this topic involves reflections on issues of structure and agency. The key concept in this approach is that of *strategy*.

Hay (1996) and Jessop (1990) make a much clearer distinction between structure and agency than Giddens. They are treated as distinct phenomena rather than as two sides of the same coin. In this approach, structure is clearly the starting point. They argue that action only takes place within a pre-existing structured context which is *strategically selective*, that is, it favours certain strategies over others. Thus, Hay argues that such contexts are not like level playing fields; they have sloping contours which act to advantage certain 'players'. For example, an institution such as the Waldorf Hotel in New York is structured in a way which privileges wealthy customers. The costs involved in staying at such a hotel can only easily be met by those with a high disposable income. Thus, the Waldorf is structured to be strategically selective: the rules strongly influence who is likely to visit the hotel. This does not mean that it is impossible for the less wealthy to gain access to the Waldorf but it is much more difficult. Thus, again the structures both enable and constrain.

Actors are reflexive and formulate strategy on the basis of partial knowledge of the structures. It is possible for actors to formulate strategies which overcome the problems created for them by strategically selective contexts. For example, consider the case of someone seeking tickets for the next Olympic games. An individual may find themselves at a disadvantage in obtaining tickets in comparison to someone with access to specially designated corporate tickets. However, they may be prepared to queue overnight to ensure they can buy the limited publicly available tickets. Therefore, the individual has developed an effective strategy to overcome the problem imposed by their strategic disadvantage.

Relatedly, Hay (1996) and Jessop (1990) stress the ability of agents to alter structural circumstances through an active process of *strategic learning*: 'agents are reflexive, capable of reformulating within limits their own identities and interests, and able to engage in strategic calculation about their current situation' (Hay 1996: 124). For example, a job seeker may make several unsuccessful attempts to gain employment. However, by gaining feedback from employers, and perhaps from interviews, they may adapt their future approach to finding a job and, consequently, prove successful. Therefore, the individual has learned from past failure and adapted their job-seeking strategy accordingly. The strategies which individuals or groups adopt will yield effects; some of these may be intended, but there are also likely to be unintended consequences. For example, a government may adopt a strategy aimed at reducing unemployment. However, although it may be successful in achieving this it may find that inflation increases as a side effect. Frequently then, actions can lead to changes in the structural context which are unanticipated or unwanted.

Overall, Hay (1996) and Jessop's (1990) position on the structure–agency relationship appears more convincing. Their focus on strategic issues offers a clearer understanding of how structure and agency interact and (can) transform one another. As I shall argue later, in some respects the approach is theoretically underdeveloped. Nonetheless, the strategic–relational approach marks a significant advance on that of Giddens and has significant affinities with the third 'dialectical' approach on structure–agency which I discuss in the final section of the chapter.

The postmodern onslaught

There are now few political scientists who are unaware of the growing influence of postmodernism in recent years (see Bevir and Rhodes, Chapter 6). Indeed, it is now one of the most recognisable (if by no means easily accessible) general perspectives within university departments. Postmodernism tends to provoke enthusiasm and condemnation in equal measure. However, there is little doubt that many of the key ideas associated with it have become highly influential, often even on those who

are sceptical of the perspective as a whole. Consequently, it is important that we consider what the postmodernist perspective on this issue is and what challenges it raises.

The postmodern challenge

For the postmodernist the 'structure–agency' debate can be seen as a classic example of all that is problematic within Western philosophy. The postmodernist sees traditional Western philosophy as being built around a whole range of dualisms, or what some call binary oppositions. These dualisms or binary oppositions work by classifying and organising objects, events and relations of the world. Structure and agency then might be seen as just one example of a binary opposition to place alongside other famous philosophical dualisms, such as mind–body, essence–appearance, presence–absence, conscious–unconscious and so on. Binary oppositions operate by using a pair of contrasted terms each of which depends on the other for its meaning. To take a well-known fictional example, consider Darth Vader's commitment to the 'dark side of the force'. We only understand the 'dark side' of the force by comparison and contrast with the 'good side'. Thus, a binary opposition is at work, both the terms 'dark side' and 'good side' depend on one another for their meaning.

The binary opposition works as explanation by privileging one side of the opposition. It makes one side a positive term through subordinating the other term showing that it is deficient, inadequate or merely derivative of the first term. In social science, authors tend to emphasise one side of a binary opposition, through marginalising or ignoring the other. For example, a racist author might promote their views by extolling the virtues of 'whiteness' and the cultures associated with white people. However, they can only achieve this by suppressing or overlooking the virtues of non-white peoples and cultures. For the postmodernist, binary oppositions tend to encourage an ultimately arbitrary choice between two terms. Structure and agency are seen as one such binary opposition. Authors have tended to promote either structure or agency, but only achieve this by downplaying the importance of the other term. For example, the structuralist can only privilege the role of structure by overlooking or marginalising the ways in which agency has a role.

For the postmodernist there is no point in attempting to establish the 'real' relationship between structure and agency. Any understanding we have of the issue is viewed as one constructed in the language and discourse we use (see Howarth 1995). This view derives from postmodernist (and arguably relativist) epistemology (see Chapter 1) in which the only properties phenomena such as structure and agency have are those articulated in discourse. There is no 'structure' or 'agency' which exists

'out there' to discover; they are merely concepts within a discourse through which we apprehend and construct the world around us. In a sense postmodernist authors such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985, see also Howarth 1995) can claim to have transcended or outflanked traditional terms like structure and agency through their promotion of the all-embracing category of discourse.

Rejecting postmodernism: restating structure and agency

The key question, however, is to what extent we are willing to accept the epistemological stance adopted by advocates of such an approach. It is possible, for example, to go along with the postmodernist's basic epistemological scepticism: that there is no privileged site from which knowledge can be constructed. However, we need not agree with postmodernists that all knowledge is merely discursive. Rather, we may argue that phenomena such as structure and agency are more than arbitrary discursive constructs, but do refer to phenomena which are indeed 'out there' with their own particular characteristics and properties. Jessop, for example, argues that if the only properties which entities have are those described in discourse then you would surely be able discursively to turn base metal into gold or else convince those laughing at the emperor's new clothes that he really was wearing them (Jessop 1990: 295). In addition, it is possible that phenomena such as structure or agency may produce effects on social reality without these being articulated in discourse. Consider the example mentioned earlier regarding a woman who fails to be appointed to a senior position within her company. Her failure is likely to be discursively constructed as due to a 'lack of experience' or a 'bad interview' performance. However, as discussed earlier, her failure may in fact be caused by the existence of a patriarchal structure, or 'glass ceiling' of which neither she nor the members of the company are directly aware. The postmodernist does not allow for this type of explanation.

Despite clear weaknesses, the postmodern critique does raise important issues, which remain underexamined within the 'structure–agency' literature. Principal amongst this is the need to account for and explain the role of the ideational and discursive. Even if we believe that there is more to knowledge than that articulated in discourse there is no doubt that discourse and ideas are fundamentally important aspects of the social and political world. Discourse and ideas directly affect individual action. To return to the above example, how an individual discursively constructs events such as failing to be appointed to a job will affect the opportunities of the individual concerned. Someone turned down for a job on the basis of 'lack of experience' may subsequently be motivated to obtain particular

types of work experience. However, if the prevailing discourse within a particular company is that 'women make useless managers', this is likely to discourage some female candidates for applying for senior positions. Thus, dominant ideas, like structures, can both enable and constrain action. As such, it is vital that we relate discussions of the role of ideas to our discussion of structure–agency. Regrettably, even much of the contemporary literature on structure–agency fails to account adequately for the role of the ideational. Nonetheless, as we will see, some significant work has been done in this regard. The most important question is, perhaps; how do we account for ideational or discursive factors in explanation without going down the postmodernist road?

The role of ideas in social life is a complex one (see Blyth, Chapter 14). It is an issue which is subject to considerable theoretical and terminological confusion. One of the key difficulties lies in discerning, on the one hand, to what extent ideas are something which people create and use for specific purposes (for example, inventing a new kind of washing machine), and, on the other hand, to what extent ideas are something we receive from others and which then determine the way we look at the world (such as religious narratives). Relatedly, should ideas be considered yet another social structure, which can be analysed along with others such as social class? Or should ideas be considered as primarily an expression of agency? Authors are rarely explicit on this issue. The discussion above suggests that, if we are to avoid the postmodernist trap, then we need to draw a clear distinction between the ideational and material and, therefore, also a distinction between structure, agency and the ideational. It is worth considering to what extent, if any, the contemporary literature on structure and agency makes this type of division.

Giddens is ambiguous on this matter. Although he discusses the role of ideas and discourse in social life at length, he does not relate this directly to his position on structure and agency. Hay and Jessop are more helpful. Alongside their notion of strategic selectivity they deploy the notion of *discursive selectivity*. This concept is used to refer to the fact that action will always take place within contexts which are also discursively constructed in particular ways. Dominant or hegemonic discourses will pay a particularly important role in influencing the strategy of actors. Thus, Hay and Jessop offer an important analytical distinction between structural (implicitly material) factors and discursive (or ideational factors). Agency is therefore subject to two levels of selectivity. However, the authors are somewhat unclear on the relative status of structure, agency and discourse. It is not obvious whether the authors wish to treat discourse as a concept of primary importance alongside structure and agency, or whether they regard it as a secondary, if still highly significant, concept.

Undoubtedly, the most explicit and developed position to date on the issue of structure–agency and the role of ideas is to be found in the work of Margaret Archer, discussed in the following section.

The morphogenetic approach

In an earlier section I reviewed two 'dialectical' models of structure and agency. In this section I focus on a third dialectical model, the morphogenetic approach of Margaret Archer. First, I discuss Archer's general theoretical position and its relation to other positions. Second, I review her model of the structure–agency relationship and consider how it may be useful in practical research. Finally I examine how Archer accounts for the role of the ideational and how this is integrated in her general approach.

Contextualising the Archer approach

As will become clear, there are similarities between Archer's approach and that of Hay (1996) and Jessop (1990) mentioned earlier. This is perhaps to be expected as all these authors identify with 'critical realist' theory, which has a distinctive set of assumptions about the world (see Marsh and Furlong, Chapter 1).

Archer, like Hay and Jessop, and unlike Giddens, insists upon the idea that structure and agency are indeed different. She argues that we require a very clear analytical distinction between structure and agency. Structure operates in particular ways, whilst agency operates in different ways. Consequently, she dismisses the reductionist claims of critics such as King who argue that structures are merely 'other people' (King 1999). Archer argues that structure and agency exercise unique properties and powers and, as such, are irreducible to one another. Rather than structure and agency being two sides of the same coin, for Archer they are like two distinct strands which intertwine with one another. Archer suggests that the key to avoiding structuralism or intentionalism is not, as Giddens proposes, to conflate structure and agency, but rather to examine how structure and agency relate to one another over time. It is only in this way, Archer suggests, that we can establish the interplay, or dialectical relationship, between structure and agency.

Crucially, structure and agency work in different ways over time: they are temporally separable. Structure, it is argued, necessarily predates

agency and changes of structure necessarily post-date these actions. Archer argues:

> structures, as emergent entities are not only irreducible to people they pre-exist them, and people are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties which mean they either reproduce or transform social structures rather than create them. (Archer 1996: 1)

Relating structure and agency over time: the morphogenetic cycle

Archer proposes a basic model of the relationship of structure and agency over time which she calls the morphogenetic cycle. This is a three-part cycle of change over time (see Figure 13.1).

1. *Structural conditioning (T1)*: This refers to the context in which action subsequently takes place. As a result of past actions particular conditions emerge (for example, climate change, globalisation, the structure of political institutions). These conditions affect the interests people have – for example, in terms of jobs, educational opportunities and lifestyle. Action takes place within a set of preexisting, structured conditions.
2. *Social interaction (T2–T3)*: Agents are strongly influenced by the structured conditions at T1. However, they also have at least some degree of independent power to affect events. At this stage of the cycle, groups and individuals interact, exercising their own particular abilities, skills and personalities. Agents will seek to advance their own interests and affect outcomes. Typically, they will engage in processes of conflict and/or consensual negotiation with other agents.
3. *Structural elaboration (or reproduction) (T4)*: As a result of the actions at T2–T3, the structural conditions are changed, at least to some extent. Some groups may have successfully changed conditions to suit their own interests, others may have lost out. Frequently, the change which occurs in structural conditions is a result which no group or individual wanted, but nonetheless emerges as the outcome of conflict or compromise. Importantly, structure is not newly created; rather it is modified or transformed as a result of actions at T2–T3. Archer calls this process of change *morphogenesis*.

T4 of any cycle marks the beginning of another similar cycle, with agents now being conditioned by a changed structural context. Therefore, T4, the end point of one cycle, becomes T1 for the analysis of later change.

Figure 13.1 *The three-phase cycle of change (1)*
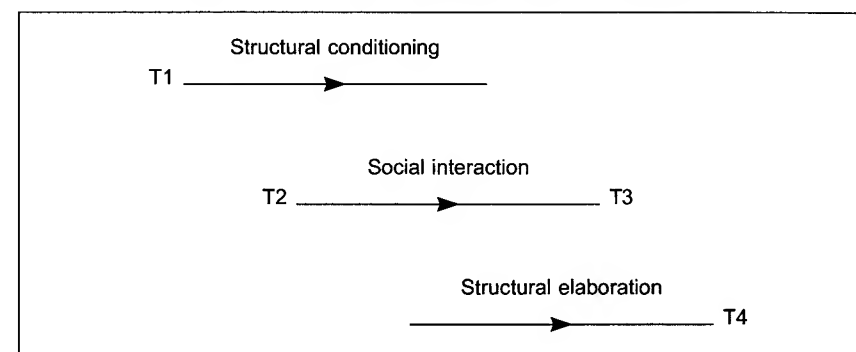
Source: Adapted from Archer (1996).

Importantly however, Archer points out that the stage T4 may very well not be one of structural elaboration, but, rather, structural reproduction (Archer calls this morphostasis). This is because, in many cases, action leaves structural conditions relatively unchanged. Individual or group action may fail to bring about desired changes, or may alternatively seek to maintain the status quo: to keep prevailing structural conditions intact. Either way, this approach emphasises that social structures can be highly durable in nature and, thus, difficult to transform.

Relating the material and the ideational: the crucial role of culture

Perhaps what sets Archer's position most noticeably apart from the approaches discussed earlier is the clearly defined role it gives to the ideational aspects of social life. She does this by placing 'culture' alongside structure and agency as a key meta-theoretical concept. Archer's own discussion of culture is extremely helpful in both reviewing and theoretically defining the role of the ideational in social theory (see Archer 1996). In fact, the main aim of drawing a distinction between structure and culture is to avoid conflating the material with the ideational. Archer argues that the relationship between culture and agency is similar to that between structure and agency. Yet, while the former relationship may be *analytically* similar to the latter, they are *ontologically* different relationships. To conflate structure and culture would be to conflate the material with the ideational. Thus, culture and structure should be conceived of as relatively autonomous. Existing theories of the role of cultural tend, Archer argues, to conflate culture and agency in manners similar to the way in which the structuralist or intentionalist reductively conflates

structure and agency. For example, some neo-Marxists have espoused the 'dominant ideology' thesis. In this view cultural systems are the manipulated product of ruling-class actors who have both the power and coherence of ideas to penetrate and shape the ideas of society as a whole. Such a view reduces the production of dominant cultures to the class-based agency of certain groups (as such, it is similar in a sense to intentionalism). Conversely, other writers point to the way in which cultures have an internal systemic unity; they work according to a 'code'. In order to communicate, actors must use the code and, thus, can make little contribution to altering the code itself. Thus, Archer argues:

> the status of culture oscillates between that of a supremely independent variable, the superordinate power in society ... to the opposite extreme where it is reduced to mere epiphenomenon (charged only with providing an ideational representation of structure). (1996: 1)

Such sins of conflation may be avoided, it is argued, if one conceives of the dialectical interaction between culture and agency over time, mirroring the relationship between structure and agency. Thus, Archer proposes a similar morphogenetic sequence (see Figure 13.2).

1. *Cultural conditioning (T1)*: This refers to the cultural context within which action takes place. Cultural conditions emerge as a result of past actions cultural conditions emerge (for example, in forms of ideology, conceptions of right and wrong, societal views on social status). These conditions affect the way people think and the way they understand their position in relation to others (for example, at the workplace, in the family, or in society generally). Action always takes place within a set of preexisting cultural conditions.

2. *Socio-cultural interaction (T2–T3)*: Agents are strongly influenced by the cultural conditions outlined above. However, they also retain powers to effect cultural change. Groups or individuals may challenge cultural norms through independent thinking, campaigning or persuasion (which may stretch to coercion). Frequently, groups with different sets of values will clash in the attempt to promote their own views (for example, pro-life and pro-choice groups on the question of abortion).

3. *Cultural elaboration (or reproduction) T4*: As a result of the action at T2, the cultural context is likely to be modified or transformed in some respects. Some groups may have been successful in effecting cultural change in line with their own goals or vision. Alternatively, the outcome of earlier interaction may be change, which no particular group actually sought, but which nonetheless emerges.

Figure 13.2 *The three-phase cycle of change (2)*
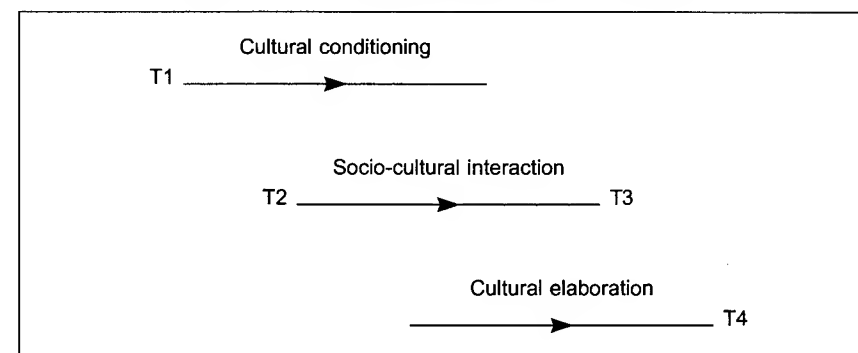
Source: Adapted from Archer (1996).

Again, this morphogenetic cycle is designed to be useful in practical analysis of social/political change. A useful case study of cultural change over recent years involves the issue of homosexuality within British politics. Here, I consider briefly how Archer's cycle may be useful in helping analyse this change.

T1: Historically speaking, homosexuality, particularly open homosexuality, has been frowned upon amongst the political classes. It was generally seen as unacceptable for a Member of Parliament or Congress to be gay, reflecting widespread intolerance of homosexuality amongst the general public. Such behaviour has tended to be presented as 'deviant', 'abnormal' or 'unnatural'. A culture existed where to admit to, or to be revealed as, homosexual publicly would be a matter of shame, likely to result in the end of that individual's political career. This culture conditioned successive generations of politicians.

T2–T3: In the period from the 1960s onwards various groups in the UK began to campaign for general acceptance of homosexuality. Such groups gradually gained support within different social and political contexts, particularly within some left-wing organisations, although the movement also met with vigorous opposition, such as the notorious Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act which prevented local councils 'promoting', that is, educating people about, homosexuality. Nonetheless, groups continued to campaign publicly and persuaded many to adopt more tolerant views. In the 1990s a few bold MPs and parliamentary candidates openly declared themselves as homosexual and gay rights issues began to make their way onto some mainstream political agendas.

T4: Consequently, cultural understandings of homosexuality have been transformed. MPs can now admit to homosexuality without it ending, or necessarily even harming their careers. Even within the Conservative Party,

traditionally the party most hostile to homosexuality, attitudes have begun to change. However, cultural change has been by no means wholesale. There has been some bitter opposition within Scotland and England over government moves to repeal Section 28. The House of Lords has sought to block moves to equalise the age of consent and a number of religious leaders continue to condemn homosexuality. Similarly in the USA, the likes of evangelist Pat Robertson continue to get widespread publicity for their vigorous homophobia, including blaming the 11 September tragedy on homosexuals and 'deviants'. Unsurprisingly, gay rights campaigners believe there is a long way to go before the full equality they seek is seen as culturally acceptable.

Archer argues that the two respective circles 'meet' at T2–T3 in each basic morphogenetic sequence. In the phase of social interaction agents face the conditioning influences of both structure and culture. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between both structure and agency and culture and agency. Archer believes it is crucial that we distinguish between these two dialectics otherwise we risk conflating the ideational and the material.

Archer's work on structure–agency is clearly the most developed in the literature to date. Her careful presentation of culture as a third crucial layer of social reality, alongside structure and agency marks a significant step forward both for the structure–agency debate and the development of social theory generally. Furthermore, her focus on constructing a model of the structure–agency debate that can be usefully applied in practical research is also a very positive development. Nevertheless, outstanding issues remain. As it stands, Archer's model provides a useful way to examine the relationship between agency and both structure and culture. However, at present, the approach is less than clear about what the relationship between the cultural and the structural is over time. Although Archer has offered some useful, if brief, reflection on the nature of this relationship it is not something made clear in her basic morphogenetic cycles (Archer 1996). Arguably, more work must be done to conceptualise how all three key concepts relate to one another over time.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the practising political scientist can scarcely ignore the issue of structure and agency. It is an issue upon which we are bound to take some kind of stance whenever we come to offer explanations of political events. Consequently, it seems sensible for the analyst to take seriously the existing theoretical literature on this question. The dangers of structuralism, intentionalism and postmodernism appear grave indeed, tempting the researcher to adopt positions which arguably do not do justice to the complexity of social reality. Yet, if such positions are indeed to be rejected the question becomes one of how we should conceive the relationship between structure and agency? Authors such as Giddens, Archer, Hay and Jessop offer perspectives which conceive this relationship as dialectical. Whilst such positions have rightly received attention it is clear that there are still issues which require further work. None of these models has, as yet, been extensively used to guide empirical research. Such work must surely be carried out to test, develop and improve these theoretical models. Above all, perhaps, the role of the ideational in social and political life remains underexamined. Archer's work has gone some way to rectifying this by placing culture alongside structure and agency as a key concept. However it is an area which is likely to be subject to further theorisation and intense debate in years to come. It should be remembered that the structure–agency debate is not merely an academic issue concerning the way political scientists go about their research. Structure–agency is in fact very much an 'everyday' issue, which deals with the fundamental question of to what extent we, as individuals, have the ability to direct our lives in the face of sometimes enormous constraints. By investigating the relationship between structure and agency we are in fact 'confronting the most pressing social problem of the human condition' (Archer 1996: xii).

Further reading

- There are few political science texts that deal explicitly with issues of structure and agency. However, amongst sociology texts Layder (1994), Sayer (1992) and Dessler (1989) attempt to apply their ideas to politics and international relations.
- See Hay (1995) for an accessible overview of different positions in the structure and agency debate.
- On structuration theory, see Giddens (1979).
- On the strategic relational approach, see Jessop (1990).

Institutions and Ideas

MARK BLYTH

Introduction

Students coming to grips with political science often get frustrated with the seemingly unnecessary philosophical navel-gazing that goes on. Students want to know the big stuff: why Northern Ireland has such a difficult time resolving issues of religion, or why sub-Saharan Africa seems such a developmental disaster. Meanwhile, their lecturers seem to be more interested in sorting out such things as who is, and who is not, an epistemological realist. Since such debates seem both arcane and irresolvable, some students might just decide to go back to reading the newspaper instead. This would be a pity, for the fact that such philosophical issues are at base both *irresolvable and irreconcilable* is no barrier to doing good political science. Indeed, this chapter hopes to demonstrate how realising this is the first step to properly getting to grips with the discipline.

This chapter argues that the best substantive work in political science is done by comparing the work of theorists who, despite employing *common concepts* in their research, operate from radically different *ontological and epistemological* positions. Understanding this tells us what the pay-offs from different approaches actually are and how political science as a whole moves forward. In order to substantiate these claims, this chapter surveys ontologically different theories that, nonetheless, use common concepts in their research: namely, institutions and ideas. The point of doing so is to demonstrate how the particular versions of these concepts developed and deployed in different theories tell us very different things about how the world works. That analysts arrive at different conclusions is not a problem. Indeed, the fact that different theories generate different conclusions is itself the most valuable thing, since it is only through dialogue between contrasting perspectives that knowledge as a whole moves forward.

The point of choosing institutions and ideas as our focus in this chapter is twofold. First of all, debates in the field over the appropriate role for ideas and institutions show this dynamic of a 'dialogue between opposing perspectives' particularly clearly. Both rational choice and more 'historically' oriented scholars, each for their own internal reasons (which we unpack below), turned first to institutions and then to ideas in order to explain stability and change in their respective theories. Without these concepts, both schools struggled to explain large parts of political life. However, the adoption and explication of these concepts were radically different in each school, on both an empirical level (how much they mattered) and an ontological level (what they in fact were); which brings us to our second point.

By comparing the evolution of each school's thinking on these issues over time, we can see how the discipline as a whole moves forward. In charting such progress, it is argued below that only the position of historical institutionalists is truly progressive. That is, their formulation of 'institutions plus ideas' tells us non-trivial things we did not already know in a way that does not contradict the theory's ontological basis. The rational choice alternative does not and, indeed, for deep ontological reasons, cannot do so. In order to make this case, this chapter proceeds in the following manner.

The first part of the chapter argues that, no matter which ontological, epistemological or methodological position one adopts (and, like buses in London, they tend to come together), there is, to mix geometric metaphors, no way to avoid being stuck in a particular corner of the hermeneutic circle. However, that this is so is largely irrelevant, precisely because different positions generate contrasting answers. This is not to embrace a naive pluralism. Some perspectives *may* be *intrinsically* better than others. The point is to recognise that there is no way to know this apart from by doing research within these separate traditions and engaging in debate over the results which they generate. Indeed, to presume *a priori* that one approach is necessarily better than another is to engage in an intellectual imperialism that curtails knowledge rather than adds to it. As such, comparison and contestation among different perspectives offer a way around these irresolvable philosophical problems and allow us to engage in what this exercise is meant to be all about — understanding politics better than we would if we just read a newspaper.

Following this first section, the chapter discusses how and why political scientists of different persuasions have used the concept of institutions as a way to explain political outcomes. Subsequently, the focus shifts again to how political scientists have viewed ideas, and how different 'ideas about ideas' have in some cases helped, and in some cases hindered, our understanding of politics. Next, the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of different institutionalist and ideational approaches will be noted, and what such limits tell us about the worth of these contrasting

theories will be discussed. Finally, in conclusion, the chapter notes what all this tells us about how political science actually gets somewhere, despite being so 'philosophically challenged'.

Don't worry about the philosophy ...

Political scientists rightly put great emphasis on sorting out where one stands ontologically, prior to doing research (see Marsh and Furlong, Chapter 1). Such a position is wise, but for some political scientists worrying about such things *apart* from actual research has its limitations. First of all, it is not in and of itself a research strategy. Positing ontologies is a parlour game. One can posit ontologies all day long without either reward or contradiction. For example, one can posit that, in the manner of some rational choice theorists, only individuals are appropriate units of study (Elster 1986, 1989a). Alternatively, one can posit that the world, *à la* Marxism, is made up of classes and argue that individuals do not matter in the great sweep of history. The point is, both positions may be true, at least in so far as both positions can generate new findings. For example, class conflict may be vitally important in propelling societies forward at specific historical junctures, but so might individual strategic action. Therefore, ontology – as an *a priori* theory of what the world is made up of – is necessarily irrefutable in its own terms. One may posit individuals as important *a priori*, but this does not *demonstrate* that classes are always and everywhere irrelevant: *it merely asserts it*.

Because of this, epistemologies (how we know what we know *given what we posit as real*) are necessarily derivative of ontologies. For example, if one views classes as essential political categories, then the epistemology of historical materialism offers a natural fit. Basically, the specific theory of knowledge one operates with 'fits' with certain ontological positions better than others. Going further down the food chain, methodologies are again derivative, but this time of epistemology. To stick with our Marxist example, if one posits classes as fundamental political units and gives them 'animus' through the epistemology of historical materialism, then if one wishes to find out when the revolution will come, what would be the appropriate method to find out? One may be drawn to examine the rates of profits of firms, or one may decide instead to look for growing wealth inequalities as evidence of 'pauperisation'. However, a Marxist researcher would probably not bother accumulating qualitative questionnaire data from a set of twenty respondents. Why not? Because the ontology and epistemology of Marxism would dictate that the reported statements of such individuals are irrelevant to the working out of

the contradictions of capitalism. As such, nothing can be learned by studying them.

In short, social science is not a 'pick-and-mix' stand. Some things 'go together' and some things do not. Yet, if ontologies are mutually exclusive, and if epistemologies and methodologies are both derivative and tied to particular ontologies, then does this not reduce political science to a long-range oratorical bombardment? 'My ontology is right!' 'No I'm right!' And so on. For if one accepts the position that the analyst simply chooses an *a priori* ontology (and accompanying epistemology) and runs with it, then one runs straight into a problem of incommensurability. Again, in terms of our Marxist example, if it is true that the world is made up of classes *in all times and all places*, then the Marxists are right and the rest of us can go home. But if this assertion is *not true in all times and all places*, then slavish adherence to this one position can only narrow rather than enrich our understanding. Such dogmatism necessarily means that insights gleaned from perspectives based upon other ontologies will be necessarily rejected out of hand.

Political scientists have invented various coping strategies to deal with this philosophical dead-end. Some have retained their faith in positivism and simply deem incorrect anything that does not meet its own internal canons of falsifiability and empirical proof. Others have embraced scientific realism and posit 'unobservables' whenever their residual essentialism lets them down (see Marsh and Furlong Chapter 1). Still others, those Marsh and Furlong call interpretivists, embrace another strategy. Such theorists, rather than asserting that they are right and everyone else is wrong, take the opposite stance and begin with the *a priori* position that it is impossible to know anything definitively. As such, no one can really know what is right, least of all those who, like positivists, think they do. Hardly inspiring, all this, is it? For, if ontologies are indeed radically incommensurate, then how do we find a way forward? Ironically, we do so by embracing the possibility that rival ontological positions are not only irreconcilable but are also internally incoherent and, therefore, more open to translation across boundaries than one might think. Hilary Putnam (1981) constructs a thought experiment that brings this point home.

Putnam asks us to imagine what the truth claims of epistemological monists (extreme positivists) and epistemological relativists (extreme interpretivists) actually rest upon. In the case of positivism, Putnam answers that its 'claim to fame' rests upon a single statement. That statement is some variant of 'only things that can be tested are meaningful and can be taken as solid knowledge'. However, if this is the case, there is an immediate problem: this statement cannot be tested. As such, it is unfalsifiable by its own logic and positivism becomes self-refuting.

Before the interpretive camp uncorks the bubbly, Putnam then asks what is the basis of relativistic truth claims. There has to be one, otherwise the idea of knowledge of anything would be hopeless. Even the most relativistic position must rest upon a truth claim. Indeed, Putnam argues that relativism also rests upon a statement. That statement is some variant of 'all things are relative and there can be no position of absolute truth', which seems to imply the impossibility of adjudicating positions. However, if this were the case, then the fact that people agree about what may be true at any given time (for example, slavery is good, slavery is bad) and, given that such 'conventional wisdoms' persist over time, this suggests that, *at any given point in time*, some 'things' must be 'more true' than others by simple virtue of the fact that people believe them. If this is the case, then relativism must also be a self-refuting proposition.

Now, while such a position seems hopeless, it in fact offers political science a surprisingly constructive way forward, for it problematises not 'what type of knowledge is right *a priori*?' but 'how do we produce knowledge?' and 'what is the process by which disciplines of knowledge come to accept certain positions to be "true" at one time, and "false" in another?' By understanding disciplinary knowledge as a series of negotiated 'conventional wisdoms' that change over time through the contrasting of different positions, we can better understand how we can be aware of our ontological positions but not be determined by them. (See Bevir and Rhodes, Chapter 6, for a related argument.)

How political scientists have thought about institutions and ideas illustrates this nicely. Institutions have been one of the bread-and-butter explanatory categories of political science since its inception. Given that there is no single ontology of 'the political,' it is hardly surprising that there is no single definition of what an institution is and what it does. However, at base, all definitions of 'institutions' are concerned with one thing: the production of order. How these conceptions have changed over time and why institutional theorists have latterly turned to ideas illustrates the arguments made above. (See also Lowndes, Chapter 4.)

Why institutions? Producing a 'conventional' wisdom in political science

What is now called the 'old-institutionalism' – the study of constitutions, laws, parliamentary procedures and so on – dominated political science in the early twentieth century. However, the experience of the Great Depression, the Second World War and the beginnings of the Cold War shifted studies away from the analysis of formal constitutional elements

towards a broader conception of institutions. In particular, political science developed a version of institutionalism that saw institutions as performing specific 'functions' that were 'necessary' for society to survive.

An early example of this approach was the structural-functionalism of theorists such as Gabriel Almond and James Coleman (Almond and Coleman 1960). These early institutionalists argued that almost any political system could be divided into a series of input and output institutions (*pace* Easton 1957). The 'input' side was composed of institutions of political socialisation and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation and political communication: how people were taught to identify with, participate in and talk about their state. The 'output' side referred to institutions of rule-making, rule application and rule adjudication: how the state processed such demands. By turning such input pressures into output policies, it was argued that the 'body politic' achieved a kind of homeostasis with its environment and, like an evolving organism, grew more advanced (modern) over time. Such institutions, it was suggested, existed because they performed vital functions for the body politic and, because they performed such vital functions, they existed.

By the end of the 1950s such functionalist theories dominated the study of comparative politics. The overall argument was simple enough. Societal stability, a characteristic of modern societies, was due to ever greater functional differentiation between institutions. Conversely, the *lack* of economic and political development was therefore due to the lack of 'sufficiently differentiated institutions'. Consequently, the more specialised and differentiated a set of institutions were, the more 'developed' the state was seen to be. Even in this early form then, institutional analysis formed the core of the political science world-view. There was, however, a rather large flaw in the theory. As well as being hopelessly circular, it was overwhelmingly contradicted by the facts of the day.

The problem with these theories was that the real world events of the 1960s, both domestically and internationally, simply overwhelmed them. Specifically, these new 'modernising' democracies, whose institutions were supposedly becoming more functionally differentiated, were falling back into dictatorships. Coups d'état in Latin America and Africa had become common and development was grinding to a halt in many other places. However, rather than give up on institutions as a concept, a new generation of theorists used the same concept to explain these seemingly contrary outcomes.

Chief among this second wave of institutional theorists was Samuel Huntington (Huntington 1968). Huntington took the same mode of analysis and arranged institutions along a continuum to the extent that they exhibited adaptability versus rigidity, complexity versus simplicity,

autonomy versus subordination and, finally, coherence versus disunity. As you might guess, having the former type of institutions was deemed good while having the latter was bad. However, Huntington threw a new twist into this institutional analysis. Rather than asking how societies get from 'traditional' to 'modern,' Huntington asked what happened to traditional (rigid, simple, subordinate and incoherent) institutions in the process of modernisation. His answer was that they were often ripped asunder, leaving people feeling alone, anomic and alienated. As such, they fell prey to (usually communist) demi-gods, became overeducated for the available number of jobs and ended up becoming the foot-soldiers of revolution.

Whether Huntington's thesis was correct or not is not what concerns us here. What does concern us, however, is how the same concept (institutions) was used to predict one thing – development – and also its opposite – the absence of development – as soon as the pendulum swung the other way. Yet, theoretically speaking, this is a huge problem. For, if something explains an outcome *and its exact opposite*, then one must question whether one is actually explaining anything or simply redescribing different things with similar words. As such, the concept of institution, like the theory of 'modernisation' within which it was embedded, fell into disrepute, at least for a while. Out of the wreckage of this 'modernisation theory' came two bodies of theory: rational choice theory and state theory, that ended up reinventing institutions all over again.

Changing the conventional wisdom: reinventing institutions

State theory developed out of the need to explain why it was that in moments of great economic distress it was the state, rather than any organised interest group, which attempted to resolve such crises. Through analysing such moments of crisis, it became apparent that far from just being simply an agglomeration of different bureaucracies or institutions, states were better understood as agents in their own right. This 'statist' turn produced seminal works on economic development, state autonomy, class formation and a host of other issues (Evans *et al.* 1985; Tilly 1993; Skocpol 1979). That this work appeared at this juncture was, with hindsight, no surprise, given that it spoke directly to the uncertain conditions of the 1970s and 1980s when economic dislocation in the advanced capitalist West produced a new flurry of state activity. Theoretically then, gone were the functionalist and homeostatic institutions of modernisation theory. In their place stood entire states who had projects to conceive and execute.

However, when one wanted to drop down from such haughty levels and explain less macro-level phenomena it seemed that something more fine-grained was needed. For example, if one wanted to explain why it was that certain trade union movements were stronger than others, or why national pension systems differed in their systems of delivery, then one had to deal with a lower level of abstraction. Specifically, one had to start thinking about the 'institutional' context once again. Thus, as we shall see below, state theorists became 'historical institutionalists' (Hall 1986; Steinmo *et al.* 1992)

The other main body of theory, rational choice theory, came out of three interrelated developments. First of all, public choice theory in economics turned the analysis of public policy-making inside-out (see Ward, Chapter 3). Far from viewing bureaucrats as faithful public servants, they were seen by these theorists as 'budget maximisers' and 'informational monopolists' who blackmailed the government, hoodwinked the public and acted self-interestedly in all things (Nordhaus 1975; Lindbeck 1976; Brittan 1977). As such, any notion of a benign state executing the will of the people became problematic. Second, Olson's work on collective action changed for ever the way scholars thought about decision-making and participation (Olson 1965, 1982). After Olson, the question political scientists asked was no longer 'why do so few participate?', but 'why does anyone participate given the manifest benefits of free riding?' Third, game theory offered the (largely unfulfilled) promise of turning these new insights into a dynamic theory of political change through the adoption of mathematical modelling techniques. These three currents came together in modern rational choice theory (see Ward, Chapter 3).

The unfortunate thing for this new and impressive body of theory was that the world predicted by this theory was, all in all, a little too dynamic. It predicted a world populated by self-interested agents who have no loyalties, suffer no informational or ideological illusions and are generally unable to make binding agreements with each other. Endogenous cycling and multiple equilibria became the predicted condition of an unpredictable world that was *in theory* much more volatile than it seemed *in reality* (McKelvey 1976; Schofield 1978). However, that this was the case was to prove theoretically productive, since the observed fact that most of us are still alive was taken as *prima facie* evidence by some of these theorists that maybe the world was a little more orderly than their theories would predict (Williamson 1985; North 1981). The question thus became, once again, how is such order possible? And the answer, once again, was institutions. In sum, both state theorists and rational choice theorists developed different strands of what we now call 'new institutionalism' (see Lowndes, Chapter 4). However, what 'institutional' meant differed for each camp.

Historical and rational institutionalism

For historical institutionists, the turn to institutions, as noted above, came out of the need to break up state theory in order to explain things at a lower level of analysis (Steinmo 1993; Thelen 1999). Though lacking a common definition, most historical institutionalists are interested in how institutions 'structure choices'. To take an example based upon the work of Peter Hall, what made the British economy have slower-than-average growth and more fractious industrial relations than the rest of Europe in the first twenty-five years after the Second World War? Historical institutionalists would argue that, since Britain was the earliest industrialiser, it developed many small firms that had weak links to the banking sector and paternalistic labour relations and were undercapitalised. Thus, the argument goes, when foreign competition came along, British *institutions* (namely, its labour, finance and product markets) did not perform well in comparison with other states' that had more adaptive institutions (Hall 1986). This is fine, but what does this tell us theoretically? It tells us how historical institutionalists view institutions, why this version of institutionalism is different from what came before and why ontology and epistemology actually are important after all.

For historical institutionalists, institutions are said to be *historical* products which exist anterior and *a priori* to any agent who happens to operate within them at a given moment in time. In our example, since *all* British governments live, eat, breathe and work within the same institutions, it is little wonder that the economic performance of the UK has not varied all that much, regardless of the political party that is in power at any time. The institutions of the British state make it difficult for new administrations to even think, let alone act, all that differently from previous ones. As such, institutions are seen to give content to agents' preferences. Such a historical notion of institutions and how they constrain agency is very different from the functionalism of earlier versions (Hall and Taylor 1996; Hay and Wincott 1998).

Rational choice theorists who turned to institutions see the world rather differently. Recall that for such theorists the problem they faced was to explain stability. Therefore, in contrast to historical institutionalists, rational choice theorists see institutions as *instrumental* products that agents use to 'structure choices'. Such institutions are things people build: they are 'chosen structures', rather than the historical consequences of prior 'structured choices' as they are for historical institutionalists. Such instrumental, 'chosen structures', it was argued, produced the stability for which their theory needs to account.

For example, the problem of overfishing is hardly a new one (Ostrom 1990). If all fishermen were the self-interested agents portrayed in rational

choice theory, then the last tuna would have been hauled out of the Mediterranean Sea a few hundred years back. Why then are there, even now, some tuna left? Such a problem, technically a 'common-pool resource' problem (CPR), has no clear solution since it is always rational for each fisherman to take as much as he can because there is no guarantee that any other fisherman will not do exactly that. So, even if everyone knows that the fish are disappearing and that cooperation to halt fishing would be the best strategy, there is no way to enforce this strategy; thus the last tuna dies. Only it did not, and this is where institutions make a reappearance for rationalists (see Ward, Chapter 3).

Rationalists argue that if all, or even a large subset of, fishermen agree to stop or limit fishing, and they sell a percentage of their reduced catch to fund a magistrate who inspects the nets and the docks, sets timetables for fishing, allocates slots, fines and publicises transgressions and so on, then, even though all fishermen will get relatively less immediately, they will all get absolutely more in the long run. Designing such an institution solves the CPR by increasing information flows and transparency over what all agents are doing, thus allowing effective mutual monitoring. Given such transparency, all agents can adhere to the dictates of the institution and over time this adherence becomes a norm that is obeyed almost automatically. Taken together then, both of these institutionalisms offer very plausible stories, despite their very different ontological assumptions. Nonetheless, there were still problems within both theories that necessitated a turn towards ideas. Specifically, historical institutionalists had a problem explaining change, while rationalists still struggled to explain stability, despite invoking institutions to do so.

Explaining change and stability: the turn to ideas

Recall that for historical institutionalists institutions are seen as constraining rather than enabling political action, so much so that change becomes either difficult to explain or impossible to predict. To return to our example of the British economy, change is difficult to explain because, if all parties in power do not behave the same way (as the Thatcher period clearly demonstrated), then one must wonder about where such agents ever got the desire to do anything different from their forebears. If their choices were dictated by the institutional context, then how would agents within such institutions ever get the desire to do something different? Change is similarly difficult to predict within such a framework. If no one operating within these 'constraining' institutions is likely to change things, then change can only occur due to large-scale external events such as wars and depressions (Krasner 1984). While it is indeed true that wars and

depressions produce institutional change, such external 'punctuations' are neither the only, nor the most common, way that institutions change. Consequently, historical institutionalists turned to ideas to help them explain change more satisfactorily (Blyth 2002; McNamara 1998; Berman 1998; Hall 1992).

For rational choice theorists the problem was different. Recall that, for rationalists, institutions are seen as consciously designed structures *chosen* by individuals to produce stability. It was hoped that turning to institutions would supply this stability. Unfortunately, placing institutions within a rationalist framework created further theoretical anomalies rather than solving current ones. To understand this, consider the ontological basis of rational choice theory (see Ward, Chapter 3).

In rational choice theory the individual, like the consumer in micro-economics, is sovereign. This means that anything that exists in the social world must have been put there by humans. This is hardly objectionable, but to say this much only tells us that humans make 'social stuff', not what type of stuff, or why. To explain this we need to add a behavioural assumption. In rational choice theory that assumption is usually some variant of 'individuals maximise utility'. By adopting this assumption institutions become intentional products that are designed to help individuals maximise their utilities. As such, we would expect institutional change to occur when the benefits of an institution cease to outweigh its costs. And here is the first problem – this hardly ever happens.

Societies are replete with institutions that continue after their ostensible purpose has ended. For example, in the USA an organisation called the March of Dimes was founded in the 1920s to fight polio. Polio was cured fifty years ago and the March of Dimes still exists, having broadened its agenda. But, if institutions are merely instrumental products, how can they go about broadening their own agendas? They would have to be agents to do that, and, if only individuals are agents, this starts to get tricky, ontologically speaking.

Recall that, according to this body of theory institutions are individually irrational to set up, but collectively suicidal if they are not. This brings up, *pace* our tuna fishing example, the problem of collective action. Collective action problems occur when it is not in any single person's interest to provide a good that all can share, for example, protected tuna. It may be in everyone's best interest to limit tuna fishing, but, as we have seen already, it would be irrational for any one person to try and set up such institutions, for two reasons. First, trusting everyone else not to go fishing when you are in port and have no way of monitoring other fishermen is very risky. You will probably fish since you cannot trust the others not to, and the others, thinking the same way, will also go fishing – even if everyone wants to conserve the stock (Ward, Chapter 3; Ostrom 1990). Second, any institu-

tions that would stop overfishing would be undersupplied for the same reason. If institutions are instrumental products, then someone has to spend time and resources providing them. Yet, spending one's own time monitoring everyone for the good of all, instead of fishing for yourself, is patently irrational. In rational choice terms, agents will always prefer someone else to supply the institutions that would stabilise tuna stocks than do it themselves, and, if everyone else thinks the same way, then no such institutions will be supplied and overfishing will continue (Olson 1965).

The theoretical consequence of this is profound. Institutions may well be solutions to collective action problems which provide the stability that this body of theory so needed to explain, but, if such *institutions are themselves collective action problems* then one cannot appeal to institutions to *solve* such problems (Bates 1988; Rothstein 1996). Given all this, both rational choice and historical institutionalists had reasons internal to their existing theories to turn to ideas. One needed to explain change, the other needed to explain stability.

Rationalism and ideas

Perhaps the most famous treatment of ideas within a rationalist framework is that offered by Goldstein and Keohane (1993). In order to give specificity to what ideas do, Goldstein and Keohane posit a tripartite distinction between different types of beliefs: principled beliefs, causal beliefs and world-views. Principled beliefs are seen as the normative bases and justifications for particular decisions, while causal beliefs tell agents about means–ends relationships. World-views, their final category, is where ideas 'hav[e] their broadest impact on human action' but the authors have little to say about this category (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 9). Given this set-up, ideas are seen as instrumental constructs designed to help actors achieve their ends.

The contributors to this volume go on to examine a range of ideational phenomena, from building the institutions of postwar trade to the expansion of human rights as a foreign policy goal. However, in the chapters written by rational choice theorists, something else is apparent. Apropos what we said before, despite the volume being named *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change*, the focus is very much on explaining *stability*, with ideas doing the legwork institutions had previously been invoked to do. Take, for example, the chapter authored by Garrett and Weingast (Garrett and Weingast 1993).

Garrett and Weingast seek to explain the European Community's drive towards the 1992 Single Market. The puzzle they address is twofold. First of all, since the member states of the EC are sovereign actors who, in

theory at least, guard their domestic autonomy jealously, giving up this autonomy seems rather odd. Second, since none of these states has had prior experience with a single market, then such states would be uncertain about the outcomes these proposed new institutions would produce. Consequently, how can states make an agreement about what this market should look like since uncertainty over likely outcomes would usually spell the death-knell of negotiation?

According to Garrett and Weingast, an idea became the 'focal point' of Community bargaining and this stabilised the situation. That idea was the principle of mutual recognition of goods and services embodied in the 1979 Cassis de Dijon ruling of the European Court of Justice governing the non-discrimination of goods and services. However, if any number of ideas could have ordered the single market, why was this idea chosen? The authors argue that any other idea would have meant revisions of the Treaty of Rome which would simply have added more uncertainty into the mix and made an agreement even harder to conclude. The Court's decision functioned as a constructed 'focal point' that facilitated cooperation and *promoted stability* where self-interest alone would not suffice.

As noted above, rationalists turned to ideas to explain stability (overcoming collective action problems) since institutions were themselves collective action problems. The Garrett and Weingast piece exemplifies this point. Note how the Garrett and Weingast piece is actually about political stability rather than change. What caused the drive to the single market is secondary to how uncertainty was resolved and stability was created. That this is the case shows how the desire to 'fix' the existing theory took precedence over any intrinsic interest in the effects of ideas in politics *per se*. Ideas, as the editors note, merely 'help other forms of explanation' and what was needed was still help with explaining stability in a world of self-interested egoists (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 3).

Unfortunately, just as invoking institutions did not solve rational choice's problem with stability, neither did invoking ideas. Ideas are not just 'out there' things which agents use to coordinate their actions by randomly stumbling into them. Ideas need to be developed, deployed, repeated, proselytised, spread, and so on, and none of this is costless. In fact, just as supplying institutions is a collective action problem, so is the dissemination of ideas. Consequently, the rationalist adoption of ideas runs into the same problems as its adoption of institutions. This is perhaps why, after this brief flirtation with ideas, leading rational choice theorists went off in an altogether different and more traditional, direction (Bates *et al.* 1998). For historical institutionalists the situation was somewhat different and more theoretically productive – for reasons that bring us back to the discussion of ontology highlighted at the beginning of this chapter.

Historical institutionalism and ideas

As argued earlier, historical institutionalists did not need to explain stability as much as they needed to explain change. They were fine on why things did not change all that much, but tended to be rather surprised when they did. Recent work in this tradition has however been successful in going beyond simply patching up the existing research programme. In fact, such work has greatly enriched our understanding of politics by forcing all political scientists to problematise the notion of agents having fixed or 'given' interests. Berman's *The Social Democratic Moment* exemplifies how historical institutionalists have used ideas to give better accounts of large-scale historical change rather than merely fix holes in preexisting theories (Berman 1998).

Berman wants to explain why it was that, despite having the largest and most powerful social democratic party in the world at the time, the interwar German Social Democratic Party (SPD) capitulated before Naziism – specifically, why it was that, when the SPD were in power during the late 1920s, they did not even attempt to fight the economic crisis Germany faced through remedial policies: a choice which made Hitler's ascent to power much easier. In contrast, the Swedish Social Democrats (SAP), despite being the smaller and weaker party, managed to avoid the pitfalls of fascism and laid the foundations for the world's most successful experiment in social democracy. What accounts for the different paths taken? The difference, argues Berman, was: 'each party's long held ideas and the distinct policy legacies these ideas helped to create' (Berman 1998: 7). Berman's focus on the causal properties of ideas provides historical institutionalist approaches with a sophisticated theory of how, and why, institutional change occurs which goes far beyond simply propping up the existing theory.

Berman reminds the reader that a peculiar thing about the interwar SPD was its 'special relationship' to Marx and Marxism. Marx saw revolution coming first to Germany and had foreseen a special role for the SPD in producing it. After Marx's death, the SPD became a kind of 'defender of the faith' for Marxism which made policy innovation very difficult (Berman 1998: 176–80). The Swedes, on the other hand, unencumbered by such an ideological legacy, were free to interpret Marxism as a statement of goals, rather than of means. The real-world consequences of having such different programmatic beliefs were enormous. When in power the SAP was able to develop new ideas about the role of the state in the economy and with those ideas advocate radical policies to stabilise capitalism. The SPD, as the heirs of Marx, could hardly advocate saving capitalism, despite being in charge of the Parliament. Given this mental straitjacket, the SPD's ideological leader Hilferding could argue at the

height of the interwar economic crisis that: 'depressions result from the anarchy of the capitalist system. Either they come to an end or they lead to the collapse of the capitalist system' (Berman 1998: 197). Given this position, a trade union proposal to adopt compensatory spending measures that could have halted the collapse of the economy was defeated in 1932 (Berman 1998: 192–7). In 1933, through such ideational inflexibility, Hitler came to power.

Note how in Berman's analysis it is change, rather than stability, that is being explained. The *difference* that ideas make to the outcome is the object of explanation. In contrast, Garrett and Weingast's case seeks to show how ideas drove all agents towards the *same* outcome. As was argued above, invoking ideas to explain stability within the rationalist framework was not theoretically productive because the supply of ideas suffers the same collective action problems as does the supply of institutions. As such, the rationalist adoption of ideas is at best a sticking plaster for their existing theories.

The fact that these theorists sought to solve problems internal to an existing body of theory is, in and of itself, not a problem. There is in principle nothing wrong with attempting to do so and indeed it is perfectly laudable, so long as the move does indeed fix the problem identified. As we saw above, however, neither institutions nor ideas could in fact fix the problem rational choice had with stability. In contrast, Berman's analysis suggests that the historical institutionalist adoption of ideas overcomes such problems and actually extends the explanatory reach of the theory.

What Berman's analysis does is to problematise preferences, something rational choice cannot do. The ontology of rational choice posits individuals as the irreducible units of social and political life (Elster 1986; cf. Ward, Chapter 3). Therefore, anything 'extra-individual' such as institutions or ideas must be deliberately designed by those individuals to further their interests (Blyth 1997). As discussed above, in such a world what individuals want is simply given by assumption and, assuming that these agents are rational over their means–end calculations, then ideas can only be something agents use instrumentally so long as it benefits themselves. They cannot be something that fundamentally alters what agents in fact want. To do so would make ideas and institutions *prior* to individuals and this would violate the ontology of rational choice theory. If it is held that only individuals are real, and their wants are seen as being similarly 'given', then ideas can only be instruments. Beliefs, ideologies and so on, may be seen as informational devices or focal points, but they can never be seen as a force in their own right without giving up on the ontological core of the theory itself.

Being a *historical* institutionalist, Berman's world posits institutions and ideas, rather than individuals, as its basic units. In such a world,

individuals are affected, and indeed constituted, by their ideational and institutional context. As such, ideas can tell agents what they want and, thus, when ideas change, preferences change. In the case of interwar social democracy the SAP was able to develop new ideas which enabled it to reach out to different groups, narrate their perceived interests as common and, thus, promote institutional change. Ideas in this case explain change within historically grounded institutions. Similarly, given the *lack* of new ideas which would alter agents' preferences in Germany, the SPD slavishly adhered to a rigid Marxism that ultimately also led to institutional change – albeit of a less progressive kind (Berman 1998).

The key observation is this: *Berman's analysis does not violate its own ontological basis*. By positing a world of institutions and ideas that are ontologically prior to individuals, Berman can explain how ideas generate change through the fundamental alteration of agents' conceptions of self-interest in a way that a theory grounded in an individualist ontology cannot. As such, ideas added to an historical institutionalist theory can supplement the existing framework without contradiction. In Berman's case ideas do successfully 'fix' the existing body of theory, but, more importantly, in doing so they generate new insights, give us new knowledge and do not contradict the theory's underlying ontological basis. In the rationalist framework ideas can do none of these things, *precisely because of the limits of its ontology*. This is why paying attention to both ontology and actual findings are important, for doing so allows us actually to adjudicate between the claims made on behalf of different theories. This is how progress in political science is made possible – a point we return to in the conclusion.

Conclusion: rival ontologies and progress in political science

So what does all this tell us about institutions, ideas and the broader issue of progress in political science? This chapter has sought to demonstrate three main points. First, knowing about ontology and epistemology is important, not only because it helps us be aware of the biases and limitations of our own chosen research strategies, but also because, by being aware of where different theories are coming from we can better appreciate what constitutes better and worse work in the field as a whole. Second, by examining how the concepts of institutions and ideas have been used by very different bodies of theory, we can better understand, not only the pay-offs from different approaches, but also whether such conceptual shifts and borrowings are theoretically productive or not. Third, an awareness of these former two aspects taken together allows us to

understand how the field progresses as a whole. Let us take each of these points in turn.

As the introduction argued, one can posit ontologies all day long and there is no *a priori* way of sorting out which ones are more productive than others, other than in producing actual research. The discussion of how institutions and ideas have been used by different theorists at different points in the evolution of political science bears this out. As was argued above, the old institutionalism that studied laws, constitutions and the like was totally surprised by the economic and political collapses of the 1930s and the barbarism that ensued. This school's individualist ontology, which assumed rational men who would use laws and the like to 'structure choices', not unlike modern rational choice theory, was severely dented by actual human behaviour.

In its place the institutionalists of the 1950s and 1960s posited an ontology that problematised the production of order over all things – which was hardly surprising given the real-world chaos of the preceding twenty years. In the ontology of these theorists, institutions, rather than individuals, were taken as the theoretical primitive, to which was added a functionalist epistemology. The problem was that human beings within such a framework became passive dupes who were socialised by institutions to the point that their agency was essentially abolished. As such, when real-world events once again refuted these understandings during the 1960s and 1970s, these theories, and the 'oversocialised' ontology they were based upon, were similarly discredited.

Following this debacle, individualism once again became a popular ontology for some, while a focus upon states as theoretical primitives became the ontology of choice for others. Both positions produced exciting new research, at least until theories based upon both of these new positions ran into their own internal theoretical limits. At this juncture, state theorists needed to drop down a level to explain less macro 'stuff'. Meanwhile, rationalists needed to explain the extra-individual phenomena that made the world a lot more stable than their theories would predict. Consequently, both positions converged on institutions.

For these 'historical institutionalists' explaining change was the problem. Specifically, if agents' preferences and actions were a *reductio* of the prior institutional context, then why did things ever change? For rational institutionalists explaining stability was the problem. Their individualist ontology posited a world in flux that invoking institutions could not solve since institutions were themselves also collective action problems. As a consequence, both schools converged on ideas to help them move, once again, beyond internal theoretical limits.

It is here in the shift to ideas that we can see how ontology matters. Rationalism's continued adherence to an individualist ontology meant that such theorists could only see ideas as functional devices: instruments, tools and the like designed by agents to help them get what they want. The notion that ideas could change the content of *what agents want* was ontologically inadmissible. If individuals were the theoretical primitives, ideas could not change their preferences since ideas were merely instrumental products. Ideas were produced *by* individuals, therefore ideas could not be seen to be constitutive *of* individuals without making the theory incoherent.

Historical institutionalism had no such problem. Their ontology took institutions, not individuals, as primitive. Individuals were already products, not producers, within such an ontology. This however begged the question of what institutions within this framework are, if they are prior to individuals. The answer was that institutions are 'crystallized ideas' about how to organise things. Agents have ideas about what institutions to construct to produce a desired end. This much is compatible with rationalism. But then historicists take the next step and argue that, once established, such institutions embody and give continuing content to agents' wants. As such, institutional change becomes a question of challenging the ideas such institutions rest upon (Blyth 2001). Consequently, just as institutions could be ontologically prior to individuals, so could ideas. Seen in this way, ideas are not reducible to individual preferences, but instead determine the content of those preferences, thereby allowing agents to contest institutions and bring about change without violating the theory's ontology.

Turning to our second point, what makes shifts in the field theoretically productive or not, we can see that paying attention to ontology also matters here. As these contrasting adoptions of institutions and ideas demonstrate, ignoring ontology would make the researcher blind to the relative pay-offs from these very different theoretical extensions. Apropos our examples, the rationalist turn to ideas proved not to be all that theoretically productive. Recoding the problem of institutional supply as one of ideational supply did nothing to solve the fundamental collective action problems that haunt both solutions to the problem of explaining stability from individualist microfoundations. In contrast, in the historicist turn to ideas the original framework is extended by the incorporation of ideas and not weakened by it. 'Historical institutionalism + ideas' actually tells us more about the world than 'historical institutionalism' does alone. In contrast, because the incorporation of ideas either violates its underlying ontology or makes ideas trivial by reducing them to individualist products, research in the rationalist tradition does not advance our knowledge to the same extent.

Third, what does all this tell us about progress in political science as a whole? It tells us that rival and exclusive ontologies are both unavoidable

and desirable. Only by contrasting what different theories produce can we move forward. Those differences are at base ontological differences and this needs to be acknowledged. Clashing ontologies lead to the emergence of new research agendas and new findings in a way that an enforced ontological monism never could. In fact, comparing what different theories produce and developing through discussion new 'conventional wisdoms' based upon criteria such as explanatory depth, ontological coherence, empirical pay-off and the like, is how the field progresses. To wish this away is to give up on what makes progress in political science possible.

In conclusion then, we turn full circle. We began by insisting that *a priori* adherence to any single ontology comes at a high price. Slavish adherence to a single position is useless for understanding an ever-changing world since it is only through comparing what rival ontologies produce that we can actually learn anything of substance. We end by insisting on two things: first, that, although philosophy is important, it is only important to the extent that it helps us produce actual research; second, to the extent that progress only occurs when research produced by rival ontologies is compared, we should always be aware that our own preferred ontology is both partial and meaningful. It matters only to the extent that it tells us something about the world that we did not already know. Once any ontological position begins to generate sticking plasters rather than new insights, it should probably be ditched for the good of all concerned.

Further reading

- For the rational choice cooptation of ideas, see Goldstein and Keohane (1993) and North (1990).
- For historical institutionalist adoptions, see Berman (1998), Blyth (2002) and Hall (1993).
- For constructivist uses of ideas in IR, see McNamara (1998), Finnemore (1996) and Risse-Kappen (1994).
- For ideas and public policy, see Kingdon (1995).
- For ideas and think tanks, see Stone (1996).
- For ideas and innnovation, see Dobbin (1994) and Ziegler (1997).

Conclusion

DAVID MARSH AND GERRY STOKER

The one thing above all others that this book illustrates is the pluralism of political science: it is, and should be, a broad church. More specifically, four points are particularly important: ontological and epistemological issues are significant and they help to explain the different approaches and ways of doing political science examined in this book; second, difference is the defining feature of any review of the development of political science since the Second World War; third, it is important to acknowledge differences and avoid restrictive gatekeeping; fourth, we argue that, while fusion between approaches is not possible, effective dialogue is both possible and beneficial.

The importance of ontological and epistemological issues

The differences between, and sometimes the variants within, the approaches identified in this book are difficult to appreciate without an understanding of their ontological and epistemological underpinnings. In fact, there are three separate, if related, points here. First, ontological and epistemological positions are crucial because they shape what we think we are doing as political scientists, how we do it and what we think we can claim about the results we find. Second, there are clear, if not always uncontested, links between the researchers: ontological position; epistemological position; conception of theory; research design; and methodology. Third, as Marsh and Furlong argue in Chapter 1, an ontological position and the related epistemological position are a skin not a sweater.

It is worth pointing out again, as the authors of Chapter 1 acknowledge, that the discussion of epistemological and ontological issues is itself an area of dispute and controversy within political science. Not all of our authors, let alone the wider world of political science, would share all of the interpretation provided in that chapter. With that 'health warning' we do think that Chapter 1 raises some crucial issues and helps to explain why approaches to political science are necessarily diverse.

As noted in Chapter 1, some of the differences in approach to political science can be marked by, and reflect, very distinctive and different ontological and epistemological positions. For Sanders in Chapter 2, the

aim of political science research is to use theory to generate hypotheses that can be empirically tested and, in principle, falsified. In this sense, social science is broadly analogous to, although by no means the same as, science. This view inevitably suggests a particular type of research design. If the aim is to produce generalisable causal theory, then it is necessary to generate a representative sample of the population to be studied (if the population itself is too big to study), given that the reproducibility and generalisability of the empirical results are crucial. As such, quantitative data, large samples and statistical analysis are a likely, although by no means inevitable, consequence.

In contrast, Bevir and Rhodes, operating from an interpretist position, have a very different notion about the enterprise in which they are engaged. Their emphasis is upon understanding, rather than causal explanation. As such, they do not see social science as analogous to social science. In their view, there are different narratives or discourses about politics and what Sanders terms political phenomena. Any relationships between political phenomena cannot be explained in causal terms; they can be explained but only within the framework of a broader narrative or discourse. Consequently, Bevir and Rhodes have a different idea of theory from Sanders and their approach would point towards a different type of research design and a different methodology. So, in the illustrative case study of Thatcherism which they use in Chapter 6, they focus on how different traditions of thought in Britain lead to different interpretations of the content, development and importance of Thatcherism. As a result, their emphasis is upon qualitative, textual, analysis of traditions, their effect on the thinking of politicians and their influence on policy outcomes.

This comparison offers the clearest example in this book of how different approaches to political science, and different methods, are based on different ontological and epistemological positions, which have implications for what is studied and how it is studied. However, none of the approaches and methods examined can be understood independently of such debates. So, for example, as Hopkin shows, while perhaps most comparative research is underpinned by a positivist epistemology, a key critique of comparative politics emanates from those who adopt an interpretist position. They argue that many researchers are culturally bound, usually ethnocentric or Western-centric, and fail to appreciate the very different interpretations of concepts and processes in different cultural settings.

At the same time, different variants within particular approaches, are themselves underpinned by different ontological and epistemological positions. So, as Randall shows, much of the debate within feminism has been between positivists (liberal feminists), realists (Marxist feminists) and interpretists (radical feminists). In addition, feminism also developed a

distinct position, standpoint epistemology, which has had significant influence on much feminist debate. Similarly, the contemporary literature on institutionalism, or 'new institutionalism', is split, in large part on epistemological lines, between rational choice institutionalists who tend to be positivists, historical institutionalists who are realists and sociological institutionalists who are interpretists. In addition, Ward identifies various schools within rational choice theory; and he suggests that although the mainstream approach tends towards a positivist position, the tools of rational choice might well be useful to political scientists operating from different standpoints.

Overall, we cannot, and should not, ignore ontological and epistemological issues. Everyone has an ontological and an epistemological position. Rather, we should all acknowledge our positions and appreciate, even if critically, the positions of others.

The growth of diversity in the formal study of politics

There were two strands in the initial study of politics: normative political theory and institutionalism. The standing of normative political theory has ebbed and flowed, partly as a result of criticism from later strands of political science, notably behaviouralism. As Buckler shows (Chapter 8), its concerns have remained fairly constant, although, again as Buckler argues, many fewer modern normative theorists believe that normative analysis can be grounded in universal claims about the existence of natural rights or human rights. Nevertheless, the main changes in the discipline have occurred outwith the area of normative political theory.

Institutional approaches to the study of politics owed much to other disciplines, particularly law, especially constitutional law, and history. As Lowndes argues (Chapter 4), much old institutionalism was atheoretical and descriptive. As Sanders contends, behaviouralism was, in large part, a response to what it saw as the limitations of this institutionalism. Behaviouralism was a movement that developed across the social sciences in the 1960s. It spread from the USA into Europe, but had more influence in Scandinavia, Holland and, to a lesser extent, the UK, than in Germany or, particularly, France. As Sanders argues, the aim of behaviouralism was to establish a more systematic, theoretically driven, but empirically based, study of politics. It was at this time that it became more common to talk of the discipline as political science because most behaviouralists were positivists who believed that there were analogies between the study of physical and social phenomena.

Since the 1970s, in the USA and in limited parts of Europe, mainly in Scandinavia, rational choice theory has probably become the most

common paradigm adopted by political sciences, and this clearly owed a great deal to the increased interest in what economics as a social science could contribute to the study of politics (see Ward, Chapter 3). However, although rational choice theory has garnered many advocates, it has not been dominant in the way that realism (which confusingly is positivist in epistemological terms) has in international relations (see Smith 1993 and 1999).

A series of factors have contributed to the increasing pluralism of political science. Probably the most important have been the growth in interest in anti-foundationalism and the reemphasis of interpretive approaches. If political science has been dominated by the USA, which, in numerical terms, is inevitable, in continental Europe and to a lesser extent in the UK, older, pre-behaviouralism, traditions associated with philosophy and sociology retained resonance.

Of course, the rise of postmodernism across many areas of the arts and social sciences has played a significant role in the increased interest in anti-foundationalism and interpretism. As we already argued following Randall, different feminists have operated from different ontological and epistemological positions. Nevertheless, it is the interpretist strand, with its emphasis on gender as a social construct, that has had perhaps the major impact.

Institutional theory, as Lowndes notes, has also provided a base from which new groups of researchers and writers have rediscovered the significance of institutions, broadly defined, in explaining political phenomena. In a similar manner reports of the death of normative political theory that emerged as a strong form in the 1950s turned out to be greatly exaggerated. As Buckler points out in Chapter 8, the claims of logical positivists have been challenged, or perhaps simply swept away, as normative theory has flowered again and forms an important part of political science at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The diversity of approaches is reflected in, and paralleled by, the methodological diversity in political science. As Chapters 9–11 illustrate, there are lively debates about the utility of quantitative and qualitative methods. The different methods which a researcher utilises to a large extent reflects her ontological and epistemological position. As these chapters also show, methods are becoming more sophisticated and, in particular, there has been a growing interest in combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods. We applaud such moves, but share Read and Marsh's concern that such attempts should not involve authors compromising on important ontological and epistemological questions.

Overall, we do not regard the diversity in approaches and methods as something to be alarmed about, but rather as illustrative of the challenges involved in understanding social phenomena. The differences this book

identifies have existed in human thought and discussion over a long period. Moreover diversity is something that we find attractive about political science in its current phase. It makes it a lively and thought-provoking discipline in that deep questions about how we understand our world are never out of the frame.

Beware gatekeeping

If the pluralism of political science is acknowledged, then most gatekeeping should be avoided at all costs. Here, we start with a brief consideration of Steve Smith's work on gatekeeping in international relations, because he provides an illustration of the problem posed by an inappropriate form of gatekeeping.

Smith (2000) argues that, while the key debate in US international relations is between neo-realism and neo-liberalism, these two positions share more in common than divides them. In particular, they are both rooted in a foundationalist's epistemology and a positivist epistemology (Smith 2000: 379–83). More importantly, while paying lip service to alternative, interpretist approaches, they engage with them only on their own terms. Smith illustrates his argument by a consideration of Robert Keohane's 1988 Presidential Address to the International Studies Association. In that Address, Keohane distinguishes between rationalist (positivist) and reflective (interpretist) approaches to the study of international relations. He argues that both approaches may have value and that a key aim of international relations scholars should be to evaluate their rival research programmes. Keohane goes on to specify how that should be done. Interpretists should develop testable theories without which: 'it will be impossible to evaluate their research programmes' (Keohane 1989: 173–4). This is disingenuous. Smith (2000: 386) makes the point very well:

> The most significant point about this challenge was that it was, not surprisingly, made on the epistemological terrain of rationalism [positivism]: it is frankly impossible to see just how reflectivist [interpretist] accounts could conceivably provide answers that Keohane would accept, given the gap between their epistemological starting points.

In short, making claims about tolerance means being willing to meet people on their own territory, rather than demanding that they conform to your perspective.

Some positivists, even if they recognise the existence of other ways of doing political science, want to judge the work produced by non-positivists against standards which are positivist. For example, in this book both

Sanders in Chapter 3 and John in Chapter 10 indicate a strong preference for forming research questions in a way that is falsifiable and testable. For them the crucial question is: 'How would you know if you were wrong?' The aim is to use observation (of whatever type) to test hypothesised relationships between the social phenomena studied.

These demands may seem reasonable on the surface, but they do raise difficult issues for other traditions. An interpretive tradition could not accept this approach without some qualification. The challenge is laid down to the positivist position because they have a more doubt-ridden understanding of what we can know about the social world compared to the natural world. For them the great glory of humans is that they are thinking and reflective so that to understand what is going on in the political world you have to understand the meanings that people attach to what they are doing. These meanings cannot be reduced successfully in most circumstances to simple hypotheses that can be tested. Those with an interpretive position do not believe that direct observation can be objective and used as a test of 'reality'. Most realists would also have a problem with Sanders' or John's position because to the realist many of the key relationships are unobservable.

The point here is not to privilege non-positivist approaches, but rather to accept the pluralism of political science. Each of us has an ontological and epistemological position and we should acknowledge those. In addition however, we need to find a way of talking to one another that recognises those different approaches.

A plea for dialogue

This volume has introduced students to the different approaches to, and the different research methods used in, the study of political science. As such, the volume glories in the diversity and pluralism of political science. Consequently, we advocate dialogue. In our view, a rounded political scientist should appreciate the various approaches to the subject and how they relate to ontological and epistemological positions. However, the differences between these positions are fundamental. This means that fusion, certainly between positivist and interpretist positions, is not possible, but, this is not to suggest research from other traditions cannot inform one another.

To make the point, let us return to an example given by Sanders in Chapter 2 about political participation. This chapter argues that inter-pretists (and to an extent realists) focus not so much on correlates of participation, but on trying to identify how citizens understand politics. As such, they do not impose an arena definition of politics on their

respondents, a failure of most mainstream political participation literature, but rather try to understand what those respondents regard as 'political' and how that relates to their social and 'political' activities. This research is clearly underpinned by a non-positivist epistemology and, indeed has, to an extent, developed out of a critique of existing positivist studies.

Of course, a positivist might doubt the utility of any findings from this type of small-scale qualitative study because the results are not generalisable or reproducible, and, of course, are not intended to be so. However, such studies may throw up interesting insights into how people understand politics, which a positivist could then follow up, perhaps by generating new questions for use in questionnaires to be administered to a large-scale representative sample. In that way, the positivist could generate what, in his or her terms, is a reproducible and generalisable approach. To return to the key point, in essence, this book is a plea for dialogue, not fusion.

Indeed, we extend that plea for dialogue to stretch beyond political to other social sciences. Can we easily distinguish political science from cognate disciplines? The chapters in this book clearly reflect the fact that there are close connections between social science disciplines. Of course, different approaches to political science obviously privilege some connections; so, rational choice theory draws on links with economics, 'old' institutionalism drew on law and history, while different strands of interpretism highlight links with history, sociology or philosophy. Whatever our approach, we need to recognise these links and encourage dialogue, rather than exclusivity.

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